Paris or Maybe Hell

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Paris or Maybe Hell

by Basingstoke

Summary

When he conquers the secret of time, the first thing he does is rescue Mischa.

Notes

See end notes for trigger warnings.

Thank you, Luminosity, for being my audience and sounding board for some very wild ideas. No exaggeration to say this happened bc of you.

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into 한국어 available: 파리 혹은 어쩌면 지옥 by Chairofantlers

Twenty-Three Miles to Town

When he conquers the secret of time, the first thing he does, of course, is rescue Mischa. He is eight years old, but well built and sturdy. He tackles the brigand around the knees and brings him down. He takes the hunting knife and cuts his throat.

He bursts into tears, because he is only eight years old and he is very tired.

*

He fries the brigand in a pan and discusses things with Mischa in her high chair. "Should I have saved Mama?" he asks her.

Mischa sticks the entire piece of tenderloin in her mouth. "Mama?" she mumbles. She is only two, and her table manners are very poor.

She barely knows their mother. But--"Nanny," he says, and Mischa's face collapses, and she wails.

*

So he goes back two more weeks and saves the nursery maid. His parents had been killed first, first Father and then Mama, and Nanny had been wounded when she attacked and killed the other brigand, and then the remaining brigand had killed her. So he inserted himself in the time between the death of the brigand and the death of Nanny and he tackled the brigand, which worked just as well as it would work two weeks in the future.

Nanny kills the brigand once he's on the floor, which Hannibal hadn't expected; then she grabs him and squeezes him and calls him a good, brave boy.

He doesn't cry. He isn't as hungry this time. They are not yet starving. He binds Nanny's wound, and they cast the body of the brigand out into the snow, and she makes potato soup for Hannibal and Mischa and counts the remaining potatoes with a worried look.

Three weeks later, when they have eaten all the potatoes and killed the barn cat and learned that it is very difficult to set traps for rabbits, they harvest the body of the brigand. Nanny, her face hard, cuts him up with an axe.

*

The snows are very deep. It is twenty-three miles to the town, Nanny says, over and over, as they dig bushes out of the snow to harvest tiny, frozen, forgotten berries, as they comb through the forest floor for dead mice and mushrooms. Hannibal is terribly thin. Mischa's face is losing its roundness. In the other reality, Hannibal had walked the twenty-three miles, arriving silent and half-frozen in the town. He tells Nanny he can walk it, they can walk it, they can carry Mischa, but she says no, Mischa will freeze, and he knows she is correct. He could never have done it with the added weight and without a good meal.

If only they had not burned the car, she says. That is the first thing that happened: the coach house burned down. Father went out to see, and he was killed. Mama came after him, and she was killed. Nanny protected the children.

If they do not survive the winter, Hannibal supposes he will have to rescue his parents.

*

His memories of the future slip and fade. His adult mind does not fit into a child's brain, he thinks, and then he forgets that too. He makes traps, he climbs trees to net birds, he becomes tough and rough and strong.

In the hard, hard spring, with no sign of thaw, with no food anywhere, no mice or rabbits, when Hannibal is giving Mischa tree bark and boiled leather to eat, Nanny is too weak to move. She calls Hannibal over and tells him to fetch a knife and a bowl. "You must live," she says, placing the knife at her own throat.

He could turn back the months. He could save his parents, prevent it from happening. He has nearly done it a hundred times.

But the love in her eyes, this shining, desperate love. The silence of the forest and the house. His freedom from his father.

His knife is at her throat and she is weeping. "I love you," she says, and he cuts her throat.

*

After the thaw, they walk down into the town. Hannibal has a vague memory of an orphanage in another reality, of grim faces, and so he steals a bicycle and keeps going west.

Mischa sits in the basket and the roundness comes back into her face and she starts to laugh again. Hannibal steals food and replacement tyres from Polish villages and keeps going.

By the time they get to the West German border, it is full summer. They are deeply tanned, their hair bleached white. They are well fed. Mischa knows how to tend a fire and sleep on the ground. She knows how to hide in plain sight and not make a sound. Her little legs are hard with muscle.

The crossing from East Germany to West Germany is not trivial. He considers going around, and he steals a clean uniform and a school book bag and sits in a library with Mischa, studying maps of Czechoslovakia. But it's so far, and they have nearly been caught so many times already. He just wants to cross.

The border is made of two steel mesh fences, widely spaced. One side is West Germany. One side is East Germany. The middle is forbidden land. Hannibal is nine years old now, and very good at climbing. He picks his night, straps Mischa to his back, and crosses the first fence with ease.

He steps on a mine. He has seconds, before he fully bleeds out, to rewind time.

*

He hugs Mischa. She hugs back, although she does not understand why he is upset. He thinks of her shriek in his ear as the mine ripped through them, and he bicycles south.

They are caught by police as he returns to the village where he stole the uniform. He rewinds again.

*

It makes him confused to have lived this day twice already. Did they eat at noon, or was that another reality? Does he know that face from today or another today? Finally he climbs a tree and sits, staring up at the sky. Mischa eats a ripe pear and pats his face to comfort him.

He looks at the border. The thought of the mined ground makes him sick--the shriek, the sight of his legs--so he will not go that way again.

The road, of course, cannot be mined. He looks at it. The fortifications are heaviest there. Guard towers. Lights. The tallest fences.

He has become a good hunter. He lies still, out of sight along the branch, and watches all day. They eat bread and cheese from his pockets and he watches. Mischa falls asleep at his side and he watches all night. Several moments he rewinds and watches again, over and over.

When he is ready, he rewinds one more time. He picks up Mischa and slips down the tree.

He waits. When the guard relieves himself, he climbs the gate and then stands in the precise shadow of the light pole. Mischa is awake but still and silent on his back. He counts until the moment when the guard sneezes and his glasses fall off, and then Hannibal runs.

It is half a kilometer to the second fence. A dog barks, but it is too far away to catch him. The other guard shouts, "Halt! Halt or I shoot!" Hannibal counts paces and braces himself to rewind.

"Halt!" the guard shouts again, sounding strained. "Halt! I will shoot you!"

But he does not shoot. Hannibal sees the West German guards on the other side of the wall. He hears East German guards pounding after him. He runs until he cannot breathe, Mischa clinging painfully to his hair, and he is at the fence, and the West German guard sticks his bent knee through the bars, and Hannibal leaps and steps on the man's thigh and catches the top of the fence and he is over.

He lies on the ground, panting. He hears German yells and German taunts. The West Germans are cheering him, giving them water.

"Hey! Kid, are you German?"

Hannibal takes a deep breath and answers in French: "We are citizens of France. Please call my uncle. He will be missing us."

*

It works. He stays up for a further day as phone calls are made, as he and Mischa are bathed and fed and seen by a doctor, as the West German guard tousles his hair and shows him the bruise Hannibal's foot left on his thigh with a laugh. He is ready, at any moment, to rewind, but then they are put in a car and driven to Brussels, and in Brussels they are put in a car to Paris, and Hannibal finally collapses into sleep when he sees the sign for the border.

*

Hannibal wakes when the car door opens. He jumps upright, clutching Mischa to him.

"My God, you look so much like Simonetta," a man says.

Hannibal swallows. "Uncle?"

"I am your Uncle Robert." He is a thin man with a long face. "I know you, of course, Hannibal. Hannibal the Eighth. And this is Margryta?"

"We call her Mischa."

"And your parents...but excuse me, you are tired. Are you hungry?" Uncle Robert extends his hand.

Hannibal slides out of the car, carrying Mischa. He looks up at the house. It reminds him of home. He feels that he should weep, from joy or fear or just the end of their journey, but his eyes are entirely dry.

Cherubs

Hannibal tucks Mischa into bed and climbs in beside her. They cannot quite manage to sleep alone. "What book do you want?" he asks her.

"I want the story," Mischa says.

"Are you sure? Look, Uncle bought us all the Moomin books."

"I want the story," Mischa insists.

"All right." He turns off the light, curls up and rests his head on the pillow beside her. "Once there was a man who didn't have a sister, because his sister was killed a long, long time ago."

"What's killed?" She always asks this.

"It's what happened to Mama and Father and Nanny."

"It means someone hurts you and eats you."

"Yes. Someone hurt and ate his sister."

"That's sad," Mischa says.

"It is sad. He was very sad. He missed his sister. So he studied time travel, thinking perhaps he could find her again, and one day he did figure it out. He turned back time and became young again. And he saved her from being killed."

"That's happy," Mischa says.

He nods. He tucks her under his chin.

*

Once she enters elementary school, the story becomes just a story, and she prefers the Moomins.

Hannibal has a future-memory of boarding school, and of his uncle having a wife. In this reality his uncle is not married--perhaps he has not met his wife yet?--and he does not send them to boarding school. They attend a private school, very expensive, very tolerant. Hannibal starts to play football. Mischa starts to collect model horses.

He attended school in Lithuania, last time, not France, but he still feels like this is too...simple? Peaceful? Boring.

He starts catching pigeons. Just chasing, at first; the birds seem fat and slow but are as wily as he is himself. He learns how to stalk, to pounce. He holds them, staring into their shining black eyes, and lets them go.

He catches rats in the cellars. They're more dangerous. He is bitten badly on the thumb and has to go to the housekeeper for bandaging; she takes him to the doctor for a series of shots, scolding him in Portuguese. She gives him a chocolate bar and a kiss on the forehead afterwards.

The housekeeper is Maria and the cook is Jeanne; they both live in. Six outside maids work in shifts to clean the house. Uncle Robert has a secretary, Pierre, and a man of business in Belgium who looks after the properties. Once Hannibal and Mischa join the household, Robert hires Giselle; she buys their clothes, trains Mischa to use a toilet, cuts their hair and trims their nails, and drives them to school. She is afraid of Hannibal, although she probably doesn't recognize her dislike as fear.

The house is so full and so empty. There are four bedrooms on the first floor, a formal dining room, formal drawing room, library and informal parlor on the ground floor, servant's quarters in the attic, work areas and kitchen and wine room and pantries in the cellar. There is a private courtyard with a sweeping driveway and a coach house in the rear where Giselle and Maria park. Uncle Robert does not drive himself and uses a car service rather than owning.

So much space for so few people, but at the same time, it's nearly impossible to be alone. He and Mischa have their own bedrooms but neither is really private. Giselle comes in and out to clean their clothes and pick up Mischa's toys. The maids vacuum the rooms and change the sheets every day, even on Mischa's unused bed.

He remembers how to time travel. He will never forget that. It's so simple, once you know how. Sometimes he wakes up and rewinds, over and over, watching Mischa sleep.

What would happen if he fast-forwards? This is the current question. His personal history--his future--has changed. He is different. What would happen?

He tries on a Sunday afternoon. He sits in the wine cellar and starts sliding forward.

Cook comes in, startles, chases him out, selects a bottle, they eat dinner, he goes to bed, Mischa climbs in, he sleeps, he wakes, he eats, he goes to school, he studies maths, he studies literature, he plays football, he goes home, he sleeps, he wakes, he sleeps, he wakes, his body changes, he grows taller, he attends university, he is a doctor, Mischa is screaming at him, Mischa is dead.

He stops there. He holds a handful of earth. He is dropping it on Mischa's casket. He remembers...everything.

He rewinds.

*

His hand hurts, he tells Giselle, and shows her the healing rat bite. He stays home from school. He lies in bed and does not eat, even when Jeanne, worried, sends up croissants and chocolate. He remembers the future.

It's so much. His head pounds. He knows two futures now, one where his sister died, and another where his sister will die. He finds that he is sobbing and he curls up and hides his face in his pillow.

She was older, at least. She was--she is--she will be twenty. He remembers the arguments: why are you so cold? Why are you so distant? Why don't you love me, when you are the only person I have in the world? Their uncle will die when Mischa is fifteen, leaving them alone in the Paris house.

But he does love her, doesn't he? He will sell the Paris house and move them to a modern apartment with a view of the Eiffel Tower. She loves it there. She loves bright colors and soft furniture. She brings home kittens that ruin the sofa, and Hannibal replaces it without censure. He loves her.

How is he meant to love her? What is cold about him? What is lacking?

He jerks when someone takes his wrist. A man is leaning over him, a doctor. His uncle is standing by the bed.

"No fever," the doctor says. "The bite is healing well."

"No, I...I miss Mama," Hannibal says, and his uncle sighs and sits on the bed. He strokes Hannibal's hair.

"My brother and his wife were killed," Uncle says to the doctor. "Thank you. I will ask the priest."

"Ah, yes. We have no medicine for that sort of wound."

Uncle sees the doctor out and Mischa runs in and crawls into his arms. She pets Hannibal's face over and over. "Don't be sick," she says.

"I am well now," Hannibal says. He kisses her forehead.

*

The priest comes the following day and discusses death with Hannibal. It's remarkably interesting.

"What is still weighing on your mind, child?" Father Darius asks.

Hannibal managed to sleep, some, and the memories of the future are softening. He opens his mouth; he closes his mouth. He brings his knees to his chest and drinks his chocolate. He looks out his window onto the garden and sees Jeanne cutting roses for the table.

"The seal of the confessional is upon this conversation. I can tell no-one. Only God will hear us," Father Darius says.

He cannot tell the priest his real concern: how does he fail his sister in the future? So he tells him the lesser sin. "After my parents were killed...we were alone with Nanny," he says.

The priest nods and listens.

"Nanny killed the brigands. Both. She killed them and threw them into the snow. The snow lasted for...months and months and months. We couldn't get out." Hannibal swallows. Perhaps he should stop there but he wants to know the answer.

He looks at the priest, who has the same posture of kindly concern. He says: "We ate the brigands."

The priest nods.

"We ate them," Hannibal says, as if the priest hadn't heard. "We ate them in soups. We ate the bones and brains. I helped Nanny cut them up."

"I understand, child," the priest says softly.

"The winter was too long. We ate Nanny too. She cut her throat into a bowl and we drank her blood and then we ate her in soups." He is shaking, baring his teeth.

"Ah," Father Darius says. "Self-murder is a sin--" Hannibal draws breath, furious, but the priest raises his hand and continues. "Self-sacrifice is not a sin. She loved you, clearly. She sacrificed herself that you and your sister might live. What was her name?"

He can't remember. Perhaps he never knew. She was always Nanny. But his mother called her--his mother, calling up from the ground floor--"Sofia," Hannibal says.

"Will you pray with me?"

Hannibal nods and kneels. Father Darius kneels with him. "God, in your mercy, as you love your son for his sacrifice, love Sofia for hers. Ease the weight of memory on this child."

Hannibal looks up at the ceiling, painted with cherubs, and imagines a skeletal woman standing before God. He imagines his parents. He imagines himself.

*

He sleeps, he wakes, he goes to school. He does not skip forward or back. He plays football. He stops chasing pigeons. He goes to church, and when she's old enough, he takes Mischa.

Their uncle dies of heart failure when Mischa is fifteen. He never married. Hannibal inherits everything. He sells the Paris house, and--

--he has intense future memory when they enter the apartment. It is modern, with a view of the Eiffel Tower. He remembers kittens, the sofa, Mischa screaming--why was she so angry? Because Hannibal was cold--

"I don't like it," Hannibal says.

"I love it," Mischa says.

"But the Tower, the tourists! It's all one can see."

Mischa rolls her eyes. "Snob."

"Child."

They don't take the apartment. They take a rooftop flat instead, with a garden, and Hannibal grows herbs and roses.

He is studying to be a doctor. Anything else seems unfeasible. He remembers, forward and backward, the inside of the body, the look of a heart as it beats and stops, the smell of blood.

Mischa is still in school. She still has her collection of horses. Since Hannibal began puberty, since his smell changed, she has kept to her own bed at night. This is healthy. This is normal.

He cooks. He avoids the meat of mammals. They eat fowl and rabbit. He doesn't know how much Mischa remembers; they don't discuss it. He hears Mischa tell her friend that her parents died when she was too young to know what was happening. She does not mention the bicycle ride. She does not mention the border. She does not mention Nanny. Likely this is for the best.

Mischa's friends flirt with him. His classmates flirt with him. He is handsome, he understands. He doesn't…

He is…

Something is lacking. Some interest. He answers flirtation with politeness. He lies in bed and tries to remember the future. Futures. He has grown to adulthood twice. Three times, counting his current present.

The alternate future, the one he lived through at the walking speed of time, is terribly fuzzy. He closes his eyes and thinks: orphanage. His uncle's wife. Florence. America. His art.

His art. He has not made any art in this timeline, and he loses track for a moment. He thinks of Primavera, of cherubs with flowers in their mouths. He thinks of sky and Father Darius. He thinks of the bowl of Nanny's blood.

No. Focus. His art, in Italy and America. His companions. There is a companion in art. There is a match to his soul. There is...Will.

He gasps, his heart falling back into his chest, and he forgets what he was trying to think of, loses the string. Should he--?

Can he stand to remember a third future?

Perhaps he can fast-forward into a time when he has his sister, has his art, has his companion. It is tempting. It has been many years, but of course he remembers how. He has rewound time a few minutes or hours on tests, once to avert a car accident, once to avoid a vomiting drunk. Minor tricks.

He lies in bed, closes his eyes, and slips forward. University, his degree, his sister applauding, hospitals, America, his art, the smell of blood, the heady fountain, the cell, the drugs, his sister's death, he wants to stop but he can't stop, the drugs, the drugs, time slips away with the drugs, there is nothing to hold on to as he loses his teeth and skin and hair. He skids to a halt when the orderly forgets his dose.

He is an old man. His fingers ache. His teeth are gone. His foot is gone. He sits in a wheelchair. His sister is dead--

He rewinds.

He goes too far. He is fourteen. His uncle is still alive. He is a child. Mischa is in her own room, and he is gasping alone in a bed, looking at cherubs.

He cannot stand to go forward. The future is too terrible.

Simple

When he refuses to go to school again, his uncle calls the priest again.

"My child," Father Darius says, and touches his forehead, blessing him.

Hannibal draws up his ankles and sips his chocolate. He remembers too much from the future. He remembers university. He remembers being old. He feels it in his bones, old aches and pains that don't exist in this young body but still persist. "Father," Hannibal mumbles, finally.

"Would you like to go out to the garden?"

Hannibal shakes his head.

"Up to the attic?"

Shake.

"Would you like to stay here?"

Shake.

"A walk?"

Hannibal sighs. It seems the best option out of bad, so he nods.

They walk. It is the center of Paris, full of life, but Hannibal is cold. Alone.

"Do your legs hurt?" Father Darius asks.

Hannibal startles and looks at him.

"You seem pained. Physically pained. Are you growing too quickly?"

"I don't know," Hannibal mumbles.

"Fourteen is a difficult age."

Hannibal shrugs.

They walk in silence among the noise of Paris streets. Tourists are everywhere. Cameras. Ugly hats. Americans are loud. Germans are loud. Italians are loud. Parisians are loud. English are loud and also drunk.

Father Darius stops to look over the river, and Hannibal hunches beside him. He thinks of broken fingers.

"Artists have been painting this since easels were invented," the priest says.

Hannibal shrugs.

They walk back. Hannibal thinks of pigeons. He sees one pecking at a crumb of bread and catches it, on instinct, pinning the wings and looking into its round red eyes.

An eagle looks back. It hates him. It will kill him, the eyes say. The heart, pounding against his thumb, swears vengeance. The wings, stirring under his palm, have the force of fists.

"My child," the priest says. Hannibal lets the pigeon go and it flaps to the rooftop, leaving only the smell of dirty feathers on his hand and a streak of white shit on his shoe. "Hannibal," the priest says.

Hannibal bares his teeth. He is a wolf. He knows the taste of blood. The priest is a deer, meek and small.

"My child." The priest kneels before him and turns his face up. Hannibal thinks about tearing at his throat and tasting the blood. "Mary, mother of God, show your mercy to this son of man. Show him kindness. Show him love."

Hannibal pushes him into the street. A car hits him and bones crack. His skull shatters. It's glorious--

There is a camera. Hannibal rewinds.

"Show him kindness. Show him...your endless love," the priest says, looking into Hannibal's face.

*

His grades are not good. He can't focus. His uncle is worried.

His uncle wants to take a trip to Japan, but puts it off because Hannibal is too much of a worry. Hannibal thinks of three lives, three futures, and shakes his head and washes his face and asks to come with, please.

Please can he come with.

He needs to see something else.

He says this to his uncle, who doesn't fully understand, but makes arrangements for all three of them to go to Japan.

*

He loves Tokyo. He loves Tokyo Tower, how it looks like the Eiffel Tower but more modern, and he loves the distant presence of Mount Fuji, and he loves the distrustful crowds, and he loves the food, and he loves the sea and the air and the trees. He must show it, because his uncle buys an apartment and enrolls Hannibal and Mischa in school.

They learn Japanese quickly. Hannibal buys a camera and constructs a dark room in his closet. He takes pictures of dead fish, of the threatening sea, of Mount Fuji, of shadows. Mischa starts collecting toy kaiju.

His uncle meets Lady Murasaki and Hannibal has a flash of future memory. He doesn't even--it's all in France, it has no context. Things happened differently last time. Will happen. Would happen. Are not happening.

Mischa likes Murasaki. Hannibal, now fifteen and gawky, reaching his full adult height, avoids her.

Is he handsome, he wonders? He has good cheekbones and odd eyes. He looks rather like one of his classmates who is half Swedish and half Japanese. He thinks about Hannibal bringing elephants across the Alps. He feels gigantic and awkward.

He takes self-portraits, dressed and nude. He looks at himself. He is handsome, he thinks.

He kisses his classmate. Homosexuality is taboo in Japan, but being a Westerner isn't much more acceptable. His classmate kisses back. They trade hand jobs under the trees by the football pitch.

He is seventeen and something is easing in him. He lives day by day and does not rewind, does not slip forward.

*

But then once again it is time to go to university. They are still living in Japan, his uncle and Mischa and Murasaki, so content. Money is no object.

Hannibal goes to America. He always ends up there, he knows. He thinks he should just go. So he goes.

Boston feels the most like Paris and Tokyo. He thought New York would, but Boston is where he feels the struggle of age and modernity. He chooses Harvard.

He studies to be a doctor. Some things are inevitable. He knows the inside of the body. He knows the smell of blood.

Mischa, his uncle, and Murasaki come to his graduation and applaud when he receives his BA in biology. He has already been accepted to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. His medical photography is acclaimed for the use of artistry to enhance visual information.

Mischa hugs him hard after the ceremony. He is twenty-two, she is sixteen. Their uncle, perhaps due to the fish and vegetable diet, maybe due to the care of his wife, has not suffered his fatal heart attack. He gives Hannibal all the money he could possibly want. He presents Hannibal with a Japanese digital camera upon his graduation, state of the art, wonderfully modern.

This is the best of all possible worlds, is it not?

On the night of his graduation, he slips out. He kisses a classmate. He guts him, severing the abdominal aorta, sending blood spurting over his naked body. It looks black as ink in the moonlight. He rewinds only once, to avoid a boat as he spreads his classmate across the shore.

*

Mischa goes to Oxford. America is Hannibal's, she says. Hannibal says that's ridiculous but she stands fast.

He doesn't have time to argue. He's an intern, he's a resident, he is a board-certified surgeon. He emails his sister between patients to see how she's doing.

She loves Oxford, she says. She sends him pictures of cows. An especial highlight is the Highland calf she sees when she goes to Loch Ness. She also sends him pictures of the boys she dates: George, Terrence, David.

Hannibal sends her pictures of the men he dates: Michael, Eddie, Bernard who laughs when Hannibal pronounces his name the English way. Apparently it's hilarious to say BER-nard instead of ber-NARD.

Mischa likes Bernard. Hannibal does too. It is pleasant to keep company with a bright, laughing man.

*

When Hannibal marries Bernard, Mischa is his Best Woman. She is nearly twenty-one and it drives her mad that she can't drink in the States. Her bachelor party for Hannibal is privately catered and features aged whiskey and male strippers. Bernard's bachelor party takes place at a yoga studio. Hannibal gloats openly.

Hannibal allows himself to drink too much and says that none of the strippers can compare to Bernard, which sentiment is universally lauded, even by the strippers.

He thinks about time as Bernard joins him in the garden. He takes Bernard to have and to hold, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. It isn't legal, but the words still have meaning. He carries Bernard over the threshold of their Baltimore house. It is yellow outside, blue inside, like the sky. Bernard loves it.

His second house--his hunting cabin--is very plain. He keeps it plain. It is easier to keep clean.

His family knows he is a hunter, that he acquired his skills during the hungry winter. He hunts whatever is in season. Duck, deer, rabbit. Squirrel is a challenge that he does not disdain. Bear, during a trip to Alaska. He does not care for trophies and he eats his kill. He hunts with a bow, in silence.

In the evening, he tends his current art project. This one is a middle-aged woman with a broken thigh.

He broke her thigh, but she doesn't know that. He captured her in Quebec. He stalked her for a day, rewound time, and hit her with his car. Then he kept her sedated as he took her to his hunting cabin.

She is anglophone and he speaks to her only in French; he's had good results with that in the past. He knocks on the door and enters. "Allo!"

"Good afternoon!" she says. He smiles and holds up the duck and bag of mushrooms. "Well! That looks wonderful. I'm feeling much better today, it hardly hurts at all. I went to the little girl's room on my own and emptied it, too." The facilities are a chamber pot. He keeps the cabin simple.

He plucks the duck as she tells him about the drawings she has done, how she's really improving but she wishes she had more paper. She thinks they're twenty-three miles from town, and she thinks aloud that she might be able to make it if she leaned on his shoulder.

Her leg is shortened from the car strike. It was a terrible break and he tended it badly. He has kept her for weeks.

She stops, suddenly, and grimaces. She rubs her leg. "You're in pain?" he asks her in French.

"Oui, douleur," she answers. "Oh, I may have overdone it. Ow."

Hannibal fetches her a glass of whiskey, offering it with raised eyebrows and a look of sympathy.

She takes a drink and breathes deeply. "God, I wish you'd gotten me an ambulance," she mutters, "but I know you live out here because you're simple, and none of us can help how we're made."

Rage swells within him. She isn't meant to feel pity for him. She isn't meant to think he's stupid. Another failure, another ruined project. She looks at his face and drops the glass, eyes wide, mouth open. She grabs for something, the lamp, he doesn't care, because he has the garrote looped around her neck. It's over in moments.

He is…

He feels hollow as glass.

The last one had been better. He shot the man with an arrow through the stomach and the wound turned immediately septic. He cared for the man for two days as he writhed, feverish, calling out for his mother, and then went still and quiet, lying limp in Hannibal's arms before the end. Seeing God, Hannibal thought. He stared into glassy eyes as they turned dull. That was a good experience.

This was terrible. He cuts the body up roughly. At least she will be good eating.

Margryta Chowdhury

Mischa's engagement party is lovely. He likes her fiance well enough; he's a slight Scottish man of mixed Indian heritage, a composer of modern music. Uncle Robert (in declining health after two heart attacks, but still alive) disapproves of him "sponging" off the family money.

"Nonsense," Hannibal says. "How do you think great art is created? She will put food on the table and he will nourish her soul."

"Exactly!" Mischa says.

"And if he takes advantage of her, I will kill him," Hannibal says.

Bernard laughs, and Murasaki smiles. Mischa and Robert join a moment later.

He dances with her and murmurs to her in the language of their childhood: "One word, my darling sister. There is always room for you in the basket of my bicycle."

"I know," she says. She puts her arms around his neck and rests her head on his shoulder like a child.

Arup tries to steal Mischa away, but Hannibal keeps her for another dance and Mischa laughs, making faces at her fiance over his shoulder. "Should I take his name? I haven't decided."

"Margryta Chowdhury? It sounds well enough. It will never be spelled correctly again, though."

"That's a plus. It's a test of friendship. Bernard took your name."

"He had no desire to keep his father's name. His family disowned him."

She knows this, of course. Their wedding guests included some dozen of Bernard's friends and a single second cousin. "Poor Brother Bear."

"We are thinking of children. It will have to be private adoption; the foster system is prejudiced against single men, which we technically are."

Mischa scowls.

"It will be expensive," Hannibal continues.

"We can afford it." She looks up at him. "Did you think I would object? Hannibal, spend the money. Buy ten children if you want them--no, that sounded horrible. But you know what I mean. Spend our money. You never buy anything."

"I want for very little," Hannibal says.

"I wish." She holds his eyes and rocks him back and forth, leading unconsciously. "I wish you would talk to me more."

Hannibal lifts an eyebrow.

"I never know what's in your head."

"Brains, eyes, and a great deal of blood."

"Brother."

"And snot," he muses. She hits him in the shoulder. "And now tears," he says mournfully.

"Beast. I mean that you are so distant, like you're looking into another world. What are you looking for?"

"The brigands," Hannibal says, without hesitation. "I am looking for the brigands."

She stands and holds him close. "I wish you felt as safe as I feel right now," Mischa says. She squeezes him as hard as she can manage.

*

Mischa and her husband settle in New York City. Hannibal has two nephews--Hannibal IX and Chandrachur--before he and Bernard adopt their three girls. The girls come all at once, a foster placement while the authorities search for their family throughout New York and India.

No family is located. The judge grants custody. Hannibal poses for a picture with his husband, daughters, sister, brother-in-law, and nephews, and he is content for a moment.

The Bow Hunter

It's the name that catches his attention. Will.

There are a great many Williams in the world. Most of them are Bill. But--"Hey, Will," his fletcher Sandy says. "Finally pulling the trigger?"

"Mm, no. Not for me. I'm looking for someone who can shoot arrows for forensic comparison. The techs tried to build a machine but…"

"Mm, no," Sandy says. Her eyes dart to Hannibal, just for a moment, but this Will notices and follows her gaze.

"Sorry," Sandy mouths without a sound.

Hannibal shrugs. "I am a bow hunter," he says to Will. "Are you looking for longbow, compound, or crossbow?"

"All of the above. All we know is that the murder weapon was an arrow." Will approaches sidelong. He is shyer than Hannibal expects of a policeman.

"I own all three. My card," Hannibal says, presenting Will with his business card.

"A neurologist? And a bow hunter," Will says.

"I have steady hands."

Will glances up at him, amusement in his brows, and looks away quickly. He fishes in his pocket for a card and presents it to Hannibal.

Will Graham, PhD. Professor. FBI Academy.

*

At home, he helps Raisa with maths while Bernard puts Dina and Sara to bed.

After, he sharpens his quiver.

*

He demonstrates archery. A tech films him as he nocks, draws, fires, with his longbow, compound bow, crossbow. A stationary target, without wind.

"Would you like to see me shoot a live target?" he asks.

"No," Crawford answers. The boss. His voice is deep. "Thank you. We only need to see the arrow impressions."

Hannibal nods. He looks at Will, who is not watching him. He walks out.

He remembers that he was in love with a man named Will in another life. He doesn't remember his husband, his daughters, his sister, but he remembers Will. Could this be him?

He's not sure. He doubts it. He thinks: he could dive into the other timeline, then come back. He would...where was the dividing point? Why did he rewind his life the first time?

Mischa. He has a sudden memory of baby teeth, a memory that isn't from this timeline. That brings clarity.

He rewinds time. He does not hear "hey, Will," but he sees the man enter and exit Sandy's shop. He follows him to his job, then follows him to his home. Will spots him. Hannibal rewinds time as Will is calling the police and commits the locations to memory.

*

He goes out hunting. He shoots a turkey, and then he hunts Will.

The turkey stews in its blood as he looks for Will at home, at work, at the nearest store...by the time he finds Will, the turkey has spoiled. That won't do.

He rewinds several times and locates Will in a stream, standing in water up to his thighs, trout fishing. "Good morning," he says.

Will frowns at him. He winds the reel slowly, drawing back his hook. Abruptly his eyes widen and he turns to run.

Hannibal strikes him in the leg with his longbow. He pulls him out of the water before he drowns and takes him to the cabin.

*

Will has been awake for several minutes. He lies in the bed, staring at Hannibal. He doesn't seem afraid.

Hannibal sewed up his leg and bandaged the wound while he was anesthetized. He didn't bother with any farce as Will awakened. "Good morning. My name is Hannibal."

Will relaxes. "So I'm not going to survive this, huh?"

"You might."

"I'm not very agreeable."

"And yet another version of me was in love with you," Hannibal says.

Will frowns. Hannibal can see his eyes flicker over Hannibal's body, trying to figure out what kind of psychopath he is. "I suppose you know I work for the FBI."

"Yes. I have no fear of the FBI, any more than any other police."

"Because you're so skilled?"

"Because I can travel through time. If the police catch up with me, I go back to the time where they have not."

"Huh," Will says.

Hannibal plucks the turkey. It was a male; the feathers are exquisite. He saves them for Bernard and the children.

He enjoys the peace of plucking feathers. He does not notice when Will sneaks up and stabs him in the back.

He rewinds time. He is plucking feathers; he turns and seizes Will's arm. "In another timeline, you succeeded," he says. "But not this one."

He sees Will looking at sightlines, looking for mirrors, finding none. The floor does not squeak.

"If you escape, I will return to the time when you are with me. For you, it will be as though you never left."

"Or half of me will escape and half will stay. Quantum...whatever it's called. I know the theory."

"Schroedinger's cat. I have control of probability. I sway it with my mind. I have done so all my life and more. I have lived several lives and settled here." Hannibal backs Will up until he sits on the bed, until he lies back down. "Why was I in love with you, I wonder?"

"I don't know," Will says.

"I think you saw me," Hannibal says. "I think you knew me. I will have that again."

"Can you, in this new life? Is it possible for me to know you in the way I once did?"

"I hope so."

"Or you will rewrite me. Got it."

"It is possible that the victorious you exists in another reality," Hannibal says.

"But that's irrelevant. Here I am." Will lies flat and bares his throat.

Hannibal sits beside him. He looks at Will's throat, his stomach, his groin. "You are attractive, but not more attractive than my husband."

"The sad part is, I bet your husband is a really nice guy who has no idea what you are. How many people have you killed?"

"Difficult to say. Across all my lifetimes, it must be hundreds."

"The tabloids will call you Doctor Who."

"That is not my name."

"Doesn't matter. That's what they'll call you," Will says. "So how does it work? Is it like Back to the Future or Twelve Monkeys?"

"Unfortunately, The Butterfly Effect was closest. I am played by Ashton Kutcher," Hannibal says. Will snorts with laughter. Hannibal smiles at him. "I occupy my own body at different parts of the timeline, and the differing actions I take in the past create a new future."

"That sounds maddening."

"I am blessed with sanity," Hannibal says.

"Were you always a serial killer?"

"Always."

"What made you a time traveler? What did you want to correct?"

"Curious, aren't you?"

"I'm going to die. I'm just doing whatever I feel like until the inevitable end. And I want to know. You lost someone, didn't you?" Will says. He turns onto his side and peers at Hannibal.

"I prevented the murder of my sister."

"But you're still the same person. So the fault is in your stars, not your circumstances. Do you like being you or were you trying to fix that?"

"I like being me," Hannibal says.

"You don't sound like you believe that. I can't stand being me. It's exhausting. I see too much. I can't get away from myself. Don't you ever feel that way?"

"No." But...he tastes the equivocation in his mouth. He doesn't exhaust himself, he bores himself. He waits for the future. The present is something to get past.

"But you know what I mean," Will says, staring into Hannibal's eyes. "Daily life. Eating and sleeping and shitting. Driving from place to place. If you time travel, you have to live it all, don't you? You have to live through the days to get back to where you were."

"Yes."

"We only have a few really memorable points in our lives. Everything else is filler. What are you trying to get out of me? Are you trying to relive your, what, your future-past?"

"It may not have been you. It may have been some other Will."

"I think it was me. How many people named Will are there in the DMV? How many of them hunt serial killers for a living? That has to be what drew you to me. I discovered you, so you love me. You aren't really that complicated," Will says. "All people want to be seen."

Hannibal...does not know what to say. He considers rewinding. He wonders when in this conversation he had the upper hand. He feels like a frog pinned to a tray waiting for dissection.

"You're thinking about time traveling right now. I think you should," Will says. "Go back to being a baby. See if you can do it right."

He remembers being eight, saving his sister, saving Nanny, wondering if he should save his parents. Who would he be, with his family intact? Never watching his sister starve? Never tasting human flesh? Growing up safe and protected?

Some dull person, he is sure of that. Some minor gangster or disinherited Eurotrash. He--no. No.

He rewinds. He is plucking feathers when Will tries to stab him. He catches his hand, forces him back onto the bed, cuts his shirt, gags him--

No. He rewinds. He is sewing the arrow wound in Will's leg. Will is unconscious. He practices his words.

You are in Quebec--

You are in my home--

I only speak Lithuanian--

I only speak Russian--

No! No, this is useless. He tries to slide forward, to the conversation he just left, but it doesn't go the same way. He is frustrated and Will runs--

He rewinds, fast-forwards, and the conversation is a useless shouting match, and he cuts Will's throat.

He rewinds, and Will is groaning, waking up, and Hannibal holds his hand and calls him sweetheart. "My husband," he says.

"Husband?" Will's eyes flicker over the cabin.

No, he doesn't have the patience for this. He rewinds to the point where Will's leg is sewn up and then he locks him in the cage in the root cellar and he cooks the turkey.

The Root Cellar

It is peaceful to smell the turkey roasting and hear Will's cries below. It is victory: meat and laments.

When the turkey is finished, he brings Will upstairs. Will stares about him wild-eyed. A bit claustrophobic, it seems.

Hannibal sits him down and he stays. Will's hands are shaking. He breathes deeply, in through the nose, out through the mouth.

Hannibal cuts his meat into bite-sized pieces and Will watches without moving a muscle. "Eat," Hannibal says.

"I might vomit," Will says tightly.

"I don't mind. There is water and wine."

Will inhales, exhales, inhales, breathes out more slowly. He picks up his fork but sets it back down. "I don't want to throw up at the table."

Hannibal takes him to the porch and Will vomits over the railing. He breathes shallowly through his mouth; Hannibal gives him a flask full of whiskey and he rinses his mouth and gags again. Hannibal gives him a water bottle and Will alternates liquor and water.

Finally Will calms himself, breathing without interference. "We've never found any of your victims. Only missing persons," Will says.

"Yes."

"So you want to play with me. Hunt me."

"I have already hunted you, and caught you."

"That means your prey is more elusive than just my body. So. What's your pleasure?" Will asks.

"Conversation," Hannibal says. He leads Will back inside.

Will carefully dices a potato and eats a small piece. After a moment, he tries a piece of turkey. "Wild," Will says. "They're not easy to catch."

"And I am a bow hunter," Hannibal says.

"That's how you caught me."

"In several realities. I am also a time traveler, you see," Hannibal says.

Will looks at him carefully. He takes a drink of water.

"This is the second time I have told you this. It led to a fascinating conversation, the first time."

"So...you traveled back in time to have it again?"

"It's more like reloading a saved game. I return to a point in time and the future progresses differently, although I retain my knowledge of the alternate reality for a time."

"Really? How many times have we done this?"

"This is the first time for this particular conversation. You do not repeat yourself often, it seems."

"I'm not a stable personality," Will says.

"I am. I'm terribly dull. I don't even have speeding tickets," Hannibal says.

"Dull by force. You have crazy eyes," Will says.

He doesn't. He keeps his face carefully schooled. He--

He rewinds whenever he is challenged. He changes his behavior around that person. He is a surgeon, and much is forgiven for surgeons.

"Mmm, just rethought some interactions, didn't you?" Will says. "Flat affect is the technical term. You don't show enough empathy. You don't fake it well."

He considers rewinding. He could do this differently. He could do it all differently.

He doesn't. "In another reality, I slit your throat," he says.

"I'm sure you did," Will says.

He fast-forwards, experimentally, and watches as Will eats and he watches and there is pain--

The shot creased his skull, he finds, holding the moment in place. He is concussed. He rewinds back to the railing, Will vomiting, and he looks up and sees a telltale glint among the trees. He was discovered from the start.

He sighs. He rewinds to Sandy's shop. He overhears Sandy speak to Will, and he tells Will he is a bow hunter, and gets a card. He demonstrates arrow strikes. He goes home.

He feeds his daughters and puts them to bed. He has sex with his husband, one hand over Bernard's mouth so that the girls cannot hear. He sits up, afterwards, brandy in his hand, and thinks about alternate timelines. Children. Marriage. School. His uncle's house. His bicycle across Germany. The winter. Nanny. His parents.

Why had he changed his past? He strains to remember. Nanny, he thinks. It was Nanny. He remembers her throat, the bowl, the blood. He remembers drinking; it was so sweet, so filling. Is he obvious? He thinks of warning signs. He thinks of people reporting him, how he rewound and erased the precipitating incident.

Perhaps he hasn't learned from his mistakes. He thinks of his youth, of rewinding during tests and traffic stops. He thinks of his adolescence in Japan and the way nobody could ever read his face.

What does he truly want from life? He has family and security. He supposes if he faced more danger, his family would be a more important shield; as it is, it's simply routine. He remembers wanting that, though. He simply can't remember why.

What does he want?

He calls off sick the next day and stays out for the next three days. After that, he leaves the house entirely and walks the Atlantic shoreline. What does he want? What does he really need?

Why does he live? For what purpose?

*

He sits on Will Graham's bed and leans over, inhaling the smell of sweat on his skin. He watches Will jerk awake.

"You have encephalitis," Hannibal tells him.

"You're a serial killer," Will replies.

Hannibal inclines his head.

"A hunter, a human-hunter. God, not another. Do you eat them too?"

There is disgust in Will's voice, but no fear. Hannibal is nettled.

"Serial killers all think they're special, but you're very easily categorized," Will says. "And none of you are as frightening as the images inside my head. Are you going to kill me, or is this more of a terror thing?"

"I have a terrible, insatiable curiosity. That's all. How do you see killers?"

"Their work shows me who they are. Show me your work if you want me to tell you who you are."

Hannibal looks at him. "All right."

*

He doesn't bother to restrain Will as they drive to the cabin. "I'm starting to think we should investigate all owners of remote hunting cabins on general principles," Will says.

Hannibal shrugs. "I built mine myself. According to the records, this is vacant land."

"Damn. I thought I had something there," Will says. "So this is it?"

"I wound them and bring them here. Eventually, I kill them."

"Men, women?"

"Both. But only adults, no children. Children see too clearly. They never fool themselves about what I am."

"And once you kill them?"

"They go into the root cellar. Shall we?"

Hannibal dug the root cellar from the earth and lined the floor and walls with native stone. There is a cage in the center, and around it is his art.

He has a primitive style, unsophisticated but compelling. He uses the bones, the hair, and some of the skin and sinew. "Oh. It's your life story," Will says.

Will starts with the oldest, a skeleton seated in the corner. Skin is wrapped around the bones, but the stomach is empty. Above it, a skeleton wrapped in dried fruit. "Moving from hunger into abundance. Poverty into riches. But after that...confusion." Will looks at the skeletons overhead, elbows tied to knees with hair and green twigs. "Not multiple personalities, but multiple identities. Lack of focus. Questioning who you are. You think you have a path, but something keeps obscuring the way," Will says, his voice becoming more contemplative.

Hannibal watches Will looking at his art. Normally people are terrified. Will is sweaty, feverish, but not afraid.

"Questions about the past. Rewriting history," Will says almost dreamily. "I strip down pieces of my victims to read their bones like runes. I am building my history, piece by piece. When I finish...when I see the full vision…" Will's gaze traces over the ceiling, over the shapes created by skeletons and leathery skin, feet tied to heads, hands wedged in stone, bones wrapped in hair and leaves. "Then I will know who I am. Then I will understand my own design."

"There's room for one more," Hannibal says.

"I'm not part of your story."

"You are, though. You are the missing piece."

"I don't know you," Will says. "I see you, but I don't know you. I'm not your answer."

Hannibal is standing between Will and the door. Will looks at him, the cage between them, framed by bones, and he still is not afraid.

Will walks to the side of the cage furthest from the cage door. "I'm going to leave."

"Are you?"

"You're not the real hunter here," Will says with a flash of teeth.

Hannibal steps toward him. Will jumps up, catching hold of a skeletal foot, and pulls the art down around him.

Hannibal gasps. He holds up his hands involuntarily to catch the bones, but it's ruined, ruined, and there is lightning in his belly; Will hooks an arm around his neck and stabs him again and again, small jabs into his middle, and then shoves him into the wall.

Hannibal reels, bounces off the wall and back toward him, his hunting knife drawn from the sheath in the small of his back, but Will catches the knife in his hand--*in* his hand, blade sliding between the bones, and Will thrusts his arm to the side and disarms him and stabs, stabs, stabs him with the tiny blade of the multitool on his keychain.

Will runs.

Hunger

Pre-dawn is turning the sky to gray. Will is canny, but Hannibal can smell his blood, even over the immediate stink of his own. He is tracking Will like a dog, nose close to the ground.

He knows he is close when he smells Will's fever. Sweat on a leaf, not yet evaporated. He sees Will, only minutes later, struggling up a hill.

This is a mistake. At the bottom of the hill is a gorge, cut sheer by a swift stream. He is trapped. He walks, slowly, after Will.

Will is leaning against a tree, panting for breath. His face pours with fever sweat. He wears only his T-shirt, his flannel shirt tied around the stab wound in his left hand. His little blade sits firmly in his right hand.

Hannibal touches the small cut in his stomach. "It stings," he says.

"As the spider said to Bilbo Baggins," Will replies.

"I read the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings to my sister as we were starving in that cold winter. We were obsessed with lembas bread. The idea of one small mouthful filling your stomach. We were eating icicles and pine needles, just to chew. Just to put something in our mouths. We chewed paper and wood. I gnawed on braided leather boot laces. My sister ate all the illustrations from her picture books."

"No, I've never been that hungry. There was always trash," Will says. "You can walk into a restaurant, pretend to bus tables, and eat the leftovers off their plates."

"True. In America, the poor are still fat."

Will slides down the tree. His right hand, and his little knife, go lax by his side. "Does it matter how I die?" he asks.

"It does."

"Fuck," Will mutters. His chest heaves, and he wipes fever-sweat from his forehead with the flannel tied around his left hand.

Hannibal inhales, deeply, searching for the scent of fear.

Will drives the sharp stick concealed in the flannel deep into Hannibal's eye.

East of the Sun

He will rewind time. He simply. He cannot decide where to go.

He is blinded, one eye destroyed, the other dazzled by the sun overhead. He will rewind before it is too late. Before he is found. Will is long gone, the car keys gone with him, the hunting knife as well.

He is a fool. He knows, deep in his brain, that he was not a fool before. If he can only recall how he became a fool?

As a young man in medical school?

As a teenager in Japan?

As a boy in Paris?

As a starving child?

He knows, deep in his heart, that he was once the wolf. He was once the hunter. He was once a god.

He holds his phone in front of his eye until he can focus on the screen. He has signal. He calls his sister.

The phone rings until it goes to voice mail. He hangs up and tries again, and this time she answers. "Hannibal? It's five in the morning," she says, her voice rough.

"We had a conversation once," he says.

"Are you okay? You sound strange."

"You told me I was cold. That I had no human feeling."

"I said that?"

The pain of his eye is too large for his skin. It surrounds him, engulfs him, so that he floats in it like water. "What was the turning point?" he asks. "When did I become so cold to you?"

"Never. You have never been cold to me. What's going on?"

"Perhaps it wasn't this life," Hannibal says. "In this life, I love you very much."

"Are you okay?"

"No," Hannibal says. "No."

He hangs up. His phone immediately rings, but he ignores it. The sound becomes part of the pain that surrounds him.

He starts to rewind. To the point where he met Will Graham--no, not far enough. To the last skeleton in the root cellar. Not far enough.

To his daughters, and past them. To his marriage. Not far enough. He is still soft. He is not a god.

To medical school.

To Japan.

To Paris.

To Germany. He lies on the ground at the border of East Germany, and he does not say he is Parisian. He says nothing.

He is separated from his sister in the German foster care system. This is intolerable. He rewinds to the bicycle.

Mischa sits in his basket and he pedals. They are free.

They are free.

He pedals south, and then back north, within East Germany, thieving and moving on. He travels east for the autumn, east with the winter. He finds a barn in Poland.

He finds a barn, and finds the farm house it adjoins, and kills the occupants. He and his sister eat well all winter.

They move on, come the thaw, burning the house behind them. They continue east into Russia.

West of the Moon

Hannibal is fifteen and Mischa is nine. They speak Lithuanian, Russian, Kazakh, German, English, French, and makeshift Mandarin. They drift back and forth over the Kazakh border as convenient. They find work as invisible spies, invisible translators, invisible thieves. They can both drive. They can both ride horses and shoot rifles.

They watch Indiana Jones in a theater in Tyumen. Mischa is taken by the whip, promptly finds one, and practices behind the house. Hannibal is taken by the melting Nazi sorcerers. As Mischa cracks her whip, Hannibal thinks of human meat sliding off clean, wintry bone.

*

Hannibal is twenty-five (a man of many skills, fluent in Mandarin, passable in Japanese and Korean) and Mischa is nineteen (agile with whip and knife, favored bodyguard for every expensive escort in Omsk) and the Soviet Union is falling. Everyone around them is excited.

Hannibal and Mischa are not excited. They move east. Novosibirsk, then Krasnoyarsk, then Irkutsk, then finally Sakhalin, which feels like home. The island has been hotly disputed between Russia and Japan; Koreans live there, but not by choice, brought to the island in the war. Hannibal finds work translating; nobody can pronounce his name, so he's Gorya to Russians and Gary to Americans. Mischa becomes fast friends with the brothel madams and starts guarding the girls.

Mischa becomes great friends with an escort who has fallen pregnant. They become girlfriends. She is present for the birth. Nina is mixed Korean-Russian and so is the baby. "I want to name him Count Hannibal IX," Mischa says, looking at Hannibal.

He blinks. "If you like," he says. He has nearly forgotten his title. The baby has fluffy brown hair and vague brown eyes.

Both girls laugh. "Pyotr," Nina says.

Hannibal becomes the de facto caretaker of the baby once Nina and Mischa go back to work. He can still translate between Russian and Korean gangsters with a baby strapped to his chest.

He starts translating for the Americans in 1995. Pyotr is two and Nina is semi-retired. She's sick of men, she says, although she takes the occasional group job to help out her comrades. Hannibal doesn't mind supporting her. She is his sister now.

The American jobs come hard and fast. Russia is opening to the west, they say, although the States are closer by far if you travel east from here. Anyway: they love Russian oil and Sakhalin has a fuckload of it.

Hannibal likes watching the faces of Americans the first time they taste the local vodka. If they try to demur, he gives them a hard stare until they choke it down. It makes him laugh

when they gag.

The American work starts taking him afield, as the executives become more important and less willing to travel into the Russian wilds. Hannibal is told to buy a suit, for fuck's sake, and stop looking like a fucking thug, and he does because they're paying him increasingly well. Mischa calls him a whore and Hannibal and Nina both give her a drink-the-vodka stare.

This is how he ends up in Hong Kong. Negotiations between Russian oil men, American money men, Chinese drilling equipment men, and an Englishman there for no discernable reason. Hannibal speaks all three languages and out of some fatal lack of background checking they all trust him.

He has a digital camera and a laptop and he sends the girls photographs of everywhere he goes. He loves the fish balls and fried intestine and baijiu. He loves the narrow streets. He finds a nightclub and falls deeply in love with a boy.

He emails Mischa a dozen shots of the boy with the message: "I'm going to eat his ass with onions."

Mischa emails back: "You have to say hello first you fucking creep."

By the time Hannibal reads that email, it's morning and the boy is still sleeping, naked, in his bed. He takes another picture and emails it as a reply.

The boy stirs. "Don't."

"You're very beautiful. You must get used to being looked at."

The boy grunts and rolls over. "I can't remember your name."

"Hannibal. You?"

"Will." The boy purses his lips and looks at him. "Hannibal isn't a Russian name. There's no H in Russian. But you're not English, I can tell."

"No. I'm not Russian or English."

"Where are you from?"

"West of here," Hannibal says.

"Everything is west of here if you go far enough. I'm trying to go west so far I lap myself."

"I can tell you're American."

The boy shrugs. "I know. Do you resent Americans? Is this a hate-fuck thing?"

Hannibal laughs. "None of the problems in my life were caused by Americans." He shakes his head and sits up, laughing, looking down at this soft and beautiful boy. "I'm not a fucking Russian," Hannibal says.

Will looks up at him. He is so ignorant, but at least he has the sense not to say anything.

"Russia conquered every state on its border and made them part of its empire. You may not think it makes a difference if a man is Lithuanian rather than Russian, but it does."

Will nods. "I do. I do get that. I'm from Mississippi."

Hannibal has no idea where that is, but clearly it means something, so he settles back onto the bed and kisses Will. He didn't come here for an argument, after all.

"Do you know where Mississippi is?" Will murmurs into his mouth.

Hannibal makes a noise of demurral. "Near New York or near Hollywood?" He loves to ask this question of Americans. It makes them tremendously angry.

Will doesn't disappoint. "New York or Hollywood? The fuck--" He continues making angry noises as Hannibal kisses him again.

He takes the boy again (smooth skin luminous in the morning light, dark curls framing his red, red mouth) and slips him his email address before he has to go to work.

*

He goes home and the boy emails him from the Trans-Siberian Railway. Traveling west as Hannibal once traveled east. "Would you want to go to America?" Hannibal asks Mischa and Nina.

Mischa shrugs. Nina considers it, but shakes her head. "Too expensive," she says. "Mexico, though."

"Mexico? Lots of work there."

Mischa drops her knife and looks at Hannibal. "Are you so hungry for your boy that you would move our whole family?"

"Mishenka! It's sweet. Let your brother be in love," Nina says.

"He's not in love, he's--" She makes a rude gesture to her crotch. Hannibal bares his teeth at her.

He continues to email Will.

*

Later, he has an opportunity in Alaska too good to turn down. He shows his sisters the dollar figure first.

The ruble is crashing. The whole country is crashing. Nina and Mischa look at each other. "Fuck it, let's go," Mischa says.

He emails Will: "Meet me in Alaska and you will lap yourself."

It's been three years and many miles since Hong Kong. "Okay," Will emails back.

*

Nina can't resist the money--there are nine men for every woman where they live--and goes back on the game in Alaska. Mischa guards her fiercely.

Will is troubled as he curls with Hannibal in bed. Pyotr is fast asleep with his stuffed bear and stuffed whale and stuffed snake, not missing his mothers at all, but a frown ripples Will's brow.

Blackout drapes are drawn against the midnight sun. A deep gray shadow-light seeps through the fabric and lets Hannibal see the glitter of Will's eyes. "What is it, sweetness?" Hannibal asks.

"It doesn't bother your sister that Nina earns her money that way?"

"Nina's pussy is Nina's pussy. Only Nina decides how to use it."

"No, of course," Will says. "But--"

"But what?"

Will sighs. "Just my remaining toxic masculinity, I guess. I'm working on it."

"This is our world. I sell my mind now, but I sold my body when I was younger. Does that bother you?"

Will takes a breath.

"I see it does," Hannibal says.

"It--no. No, I love you," Will says. He says this easily. Hannibal hasn't yet answered in kind. "I'm sorry that you had to do that."

"I was a teenager so horny I could fuck the wind. I took that and made a lot of money very easily. But it is sweet of you to care for my youth," Hannibal says. "Nina is safe. So am I."

Will ducks his head against Hannibal's throat. "I thought I grew up hard."

Hannibal breathes "*Americans*" into his ear before biting it.

*

Will stays through the bright summer. Just after the solstice, he emails his advisor and puts his postgraduate studies on hold. He doesn't consult Hannibal, but tells him and his sisters later, at dinner. "I don't need to stay," Will says. "I could start traveling again. A Master's in criminal psychology was never a great fit for me, that's all."

"Don't you dare leave," Hannibal growls, and that's the end of it. Will is Pyotr's preferred bedtime story reader, after all, and he's a better cook than Hannibal or either of his sisters.

Pyotr starts school and demands to be called Peter. Will calls him Pepe, and Hannibal calls him Pasha, and Nina calls him Petya, and Mischa calls him Gojira, but they do start calling him Peter in front of his school friends. They push back when Pyotr tries to claim Will as his father. He has two mothers and one uncle and one uncle's boyfriend and he needs to be strong in that truth.

Will's advisor emails, and emails, and calls, and sends an overnight letter. "They want you back," Hannibal says.

"Yeah."

Hannibal takes his chin. Will looks to the side, finding eye contact painful. "You are brilliant," Hannibal says.

"Lots of people are brilliant."

"That's true. But just because others don't have the privilege to exploit their brilliance, that doesn't mean you should squander it."

"And my brilliance doesn't mean that personal connections and love are without value."

Hannibal releases his chin. "Yes, all right."

"If they're crazy to have me now, they'll be crazy to have me next year or the year after. I want to experience an Alaskan winter while I'm young and it's exciting."

Hannibal snorts. He kisses Will's forehead.

*

Summer slides into winter. Production shuts down and Hannibal's work dries up. That's all right, though, because he has been paid more than enough for the winter.

Nina's clients dry up and she shuts down her website and turns off her client phone. She's happy to put her pussy on ice, she says. Mischa turns her energy toward trapping and hunting. Hannibal considers time.

He hasn't time traveled since he was a child. He has a vague memory that he shouldn't do it, that it makes him weak, but he can't recall the reason.

He experiments, sliding backwards an hour, then forwards. Will enters the bedroom on fast-forward and Hannibal comes back to himself with Will in his arms.

"I didn't expect how hard it would be to stay awake," Will murmurs.

"We didn't have the midnight sun in Sakhalin. Too far south. It reminds me of the hungry winter, though," Hannibal says absently.

"The hungry winter?"

Hannibal strokes Will's head. "Ancient history."

*

Then Will's advisor arrives in Alaska, red-faced and wrapped in winterwear too fashionable to be truly useful. "I'm here for Will Graham," he says.

"Fuck off, Frederick!" Will yells from inside the house.

Frederick tries to shoulder past Hannibal, but Hannibal stands firm as a marble statue.

"Let him in or shove him out. You're letting in the cold," Mischa says.

Hannibal lets him in and picks up the baijiu from the front stoop before closing the door. He pours icy baijiu into five small glasses.

Frederick looms over Will, who is sitting on the sofa, working on a rabbit-fur blanket. Mischa caught the rabbits and tanned the hides, but she doesn't have the patience to piece it together. Will does. It was supposed to be for Nina and Mischa's bed, but Mischa says it smells too much like Will now that he's handled the skins, so he can keep it. She's trying to get a grizzly bear now.

Hannibal gives Will and Frederick each a glass and joins Will. Will has learned, by now, how to drink baijiu.

Frederick has not. He chokes and spits the liquor back into the glass. Hannibal smirks. "My god, that tastes like--like--"

"I think it tastes like semen," Will says.

Frederick glares at him. "It's not too late to come back to school, but one more semester and it will be. Georgetown will not be denied."

"Georgetown was an old goal, not a current goal. My travels have given me perspective."

"And expanded your palate," Frederick says, looking at Hannibal. Hannibal sips his baijiu.

"Will. Who the fuck is this guy? No, goblin, not for you," Mischa says, grabbing Pyotr away from the baijiu. Pyotr makes a face and rubs his nose.

"This is my advisor, Dr. Frederick Chilton," Will says. "He's not staying."

"What the fuck is an advisor?" Mischa asks.

Frederick scoffs.

"He tells me what I'm supposed to do in graduate school. In the American system, we have elementary school for little kids, then high school for teenagers, then college after high

school, then graduate school if you want to keep going. I met Hannibal when I was halfway through college and now I'm taking a break from graduate school," Will explains.

"That's a lot of fucking school," Mischa says. She sits and pulls Pyotr into her lap, her glass of baijiu out of his reach. She doesn't really like it, not like Hannibal does, but she'll drink it.

"It's a fucking fuckload of school, and I still have four more years if I keep on my original plan. I'm questioning my original plan, though. I'm gaining some perspective and thinking about what I want. And rampaging through my boyfriend's house isn't going to make me decide any faster, Frederick."

Frederick closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. "You have a unique mind," he says, painfully, as if the words are made of glass. "It should not sit in Alaska and pickle in...Russian semen liquor."

Hannibal sits up with a thrill of delighted offense. "Shanghainese semen liquor," he corrects. "Unless you meant semen, comma, liquor, but my semen isn't Russian either."

"Yes, and who are you? Some oil worker? How did you even meet this man? What are you doing with him? And who is *she*? What *is* this nonsense, Will?"

"A home," Will says sharply, loudly. "Fuck off, Frederick. If I decide to come back, I'll tell you."

"I did not come all this way for that answer," Frederick says, reaching out to grab Will, which is when Mischa stabs him with her hunting knife.

Frederick coughs. Blood spatters across Will's face. His eyes are enormous, pupils like black pools.

"No," Will whispers.

"Mischa!" Hannibal takes the knife. He looks at Pyotr, curled up with his hands pressed to his face.

"He can't take Will."

"He doesn't have the power to take Will. This isn't the USSR."

Frederick collapses.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. For the first time since childhood, Hannibal rewrites the past.

"It should not sit in Alaska and pickle in...Russian semen liquor."

Hannibal stands. "You may go," he says. He takes the glass from Frederick's hand and pulls him toward the door, putting his own body between Frederick and Mischa. He notices the tense muscle in her arm where it curls around Pyotr.

Frederick glares at him in offense. "Take your hands off me! Will, I will not tolerate this!"

Will doesn't answer. He's looking at Hannibal, brow furrowed.

Hannibal shoves Frederick out the door. "Please save your dignity and do not knock again. I will call my neighbor to release his dogs." Frederick fucks off huffily.

Hannibal returns inside and picks up the fifth glass--Nina never emerged from the bedroom--and drinks it in one long gulp. "What an asshole."

"Yeah," Will says absently.

*

The confused, distracted look on Will's face remains through the long evening. When they retire to bed, Will opens his mouth as if to speak, but stops.

"Ask. I can't sleep with this doubt beside me," Hannibal says.

"It's crazy," Will says.

"Ask anyway."

Will exhales. "It feels...like you did something. This afternoon. Right before Chilton left, it felt like something happened."

"I decided to remove him from my house."

Will shakes his head. "It was like--I can't describe it. Like deja vu, but not. Like seeing double."

Hannibal catches his breath. He looks at Will, this soft boy growing into his strength. "Perhaps you can do it too," he says.

He teaches Will how to time travel that night.

The Castle

It feels terribly odd when Will travels time. His memories are objectively untroubled, but he feels unsettled, like he's carrying emotions from things that didn't happen.

"I just traveled back from yesterday. Can I change things? Will they happen differently?" Will asks.

"Yes. I rescued my sister," Hannibal says. "I don't remember very much about the alternate timeline, but I remember the reason I traveled."

"How did you figure it out?"

"I don't remember. My adult memories didn't fit well into my eight-year-old brain."

"What happened? You saved Mischa? From what?"

"She was killed. In this reality, our parents were killed and we survived."

"But your parents still died, they couldn't be saved?" Will says. "You couldn't go back further and change that?"

"There is a good reason for that, but I can't remember what it is. I know that I made myself remember that it's dangerous to use this power too much."

"I've seen this movie," Will mutters. "Are we in Twelve Monkeys or the Butterfly Effect?"

"I haven't seen either of those."

"Either way, only when it's important," Will says.

Hannibal's thirtieth birthday falls in early winter. The nights are growing long.

Hannibal's eighth birthday falls in early winter. The days are shrinking and the air is so cold. He gets a bow for his birthday but he can only use it in the portrait gallery; outside, his fingers won't hold the string.

He tries to use his bow when the brigands come, but they just take it from him, laughing, and then shut Hannibal and his sister in the wine cellar. They huddle together. Hannibal feels like he is forgetting something important, something he needs to remember.

He still can't remember when they take Mischa a week later.

*

When he is thirty, he travels to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. It is garish and loud and vomit-soaked, but also honest and truthful; it reminds him of Venice. One may tell the truth with masks.

On his second day, a young police officer turns his head when he sees him. "Hannibal!" he cries. He turns and jogs to catch up.

He doesn't remember this young man's face, and he is unspeakably lovely, so Hannibal surely would have. Still, something nags at him; besides, the young man knows his name. "Forgive me. I don't recall where we met."

"The other timeline," the young man says softly. "I went to Hong Kong but I couldn't find you. I remember everything, Hannibal. I thought you said I would forget."

Hannibal doesn't know what he's talking about until he suddenly does. "Will. You traveled time."

"I had to fix one thing. I thought I could slip in and out--"

"No. No, it's not so easy."

"Yeah. Everything is different, Jesus, I really fucked up."

"How far did you travel?" Hannibal asks.

"When I was two. I wanted to change one little thing, but--hell, I have to get back to work. Where are you staying?"

Hannibal gives him his hotel information. Will shows up that night and walks straight into his arms, kissing him. "Your voice is different," Will says. "Why weren't you there in Hong Kong? I missed you, even when I was so little I didn't understand what I was missing. My father called you my imaginary friend."

"I was pulled back when you traveled," Hannibal says, putting it together. Half-remembered feelings, like the ghosts of memories, are filling in the gaps. "We went together. But I wasn't ready."

"Jesus. Did I change something? I'm sorry."

"My sister was murdered," Hannibal says.

"Oh." It is the slightest exhalation.

"I could not save her."

"I'm sorry," Will breathes.

"I remember...you are from Mississippi. And here you are now in New Orleans. Next time we meet, I will be ready. I will have decades to decide how you die," Hannibal says, and he rewinds time.

*

The first thing he does is write down everything he can remember about Will. The second thing he does is try to save Mischa.

He fails.

He rewinds and tries again.

He fails.

He rewinds, again and again, pain and fury growing, until he succeeds; he snatches his sister up and flees the castle, running the twenty-three miles to town.

When he arrives, his sister is frozen in his arms.

He brushes her hair back from her small blue face. He rewinds.

*

Eventually, after infinite variety of a handful of minutes, he is sitting in the police station with his sister, his face stony, insisting that they call his uncle in Paris. When the officer tries to call the local leader of the Soviet party instead, Hannibal grabs his wrist with an iron hand.

"Call my uncle," Hannibal snarls.

The officer does.

Frozen

Hannibal plans his revenge for most of his life. The problem, of course, is that once Will sees him, he will likely remember how to time travel, just as Hannibal did. It's a tricky problem. To move without being seen, without triggering memory. The obvious method, of course, is to wear a mask, but that seems crude.

He learns chess young. Later, as an adolescent, he learns to play go. He studies crime and anatomy. He reads accounts of interrogation and torture, cults, the Stockholm effect; he reads stories of burn victims and frostbite victims and survivors of the Holocaust. He considers how to force this man to feel the equivalent of the death of his sister 100 times over.

He has no need for money, after his uncle's fatal heart attack. He inherits the Paris property, then sues the newly free country of Lithuania for the return of his family castle and wins.

He wants two things: to keep his sister alive and to punish Will Graham for killing her so many times. He just can't decide on a death sweet enough. Several times, he travels to America and finds Will just to stare at him, just to watch him, never to speak. If Will catches a glimpse of him, he rewinds.

He reads about empathy, captor bonding, arranged marriage. He learns about mirror neurons and trauma. He wonders how his own brain has been altered by the memories of so many lives. Still, he can't help but rewind time when he has learned something thoroughly, so that he can use the time again to learn something else.

He considers solitude. He considers burying Will in a hole in the ground with food and water and no human contact. He considers stabbing Will and rewinding, over and over, until they both forget who they are.

Who is he, though? Hannibal packs up his plans in Lithuania and travels back to Paris. His sister lives in Paris, attending university there, but the house is empty when he arrives. He is playing chess against himself when he is frozen in place.

Time stops.

"I don't know if I can do this without killing you," Mischa says in the space between seconds. Hannibal looks up at her. The bishop that was in his hand hovers in the air. "I can't die again," she says.

"You will never die again," Hannibal says.

"When the blackness comes in, I don't want to come back. I feel nothing there, it's like the womb, it's like the endlessness of space," she says, fists clenched, one step toward him. "But I couldn't remember for such a long time. Then I met her and it came back to me."

Hannibal turns his head and sees Nina, remembers Nina. He catches his breath.

"I've had five children and none of them exist any more. You can never stop rewriting time. A different sperm meets a different egg and I have a different child," Nina says. Her eyes are wild. "Pyotr. Masha. Alla. Sasha. Eva. Kill him, Mischa."

There is a knife in Mischa's hand. "I love you, big brother, but you're a terrible thing," she says.

"The secret of time travel still exists. You both know it. Can you stop yourselves as well?"

"I have no fucking idea but I know you definitely can not. As soon as I let you out of this bubble, you're going to rewrite it."

He meets her eyes. He cannot say that he won't. "I wasn't the one who rewrote Pyotr," he says.

"It doesn't matter who did it! It only matters that it never happens again!" Nina shouts.

Mischa looks down; Hannibal sees her decide, and then she cuts his throat.

Limbo

Death is, in fact, an empty space. Hannibal would have expected nothing else. Still, he feels vaguely anticipatory, like he's waiting for something.

Perhaps he's waiting for the death of all who knew him.

Paris

He is in the Paris house with his sister standing before him unbloodied. Time is ticking past. She looks to the side, her face a mask of shame. "He's my brother," Mischa says. "He's a fucking mess but he's all I have."

Nina shrieks, wordlessly, and falls on Mischa, striking her, sobbing; they weep together, rocking back and forth.

Hannibal does not rewind. He picks up the white king and white queen, cradling them together in his palm. When he looks back up, both women are staring at him, wet-eyed.

"I did not think you remembered," Hannibal says.

He does not have many feelings. Virtually none, in fact. He loves his sister. Everything else is secondary. "What would you have me do?" Hannibal asks.

"Never time travel again. Never kill anyone again. Leave Will Graham the fuck alone. You had him and you lost him and that's the end, that's it. You can do anything else apart from those things. And I'll know if you don't, and I will never forget it, in this life or any life to come," Mischa says.

Hannibal believes her.

*

It is strange, living with consequences. He has always believed himself free. He can feel Mischa's eyes like a fence around his soul.

To occupy himself, he takes classes. A lot of classes. He finds a strange peace in art classes, in painting the images in his head. He paints a frozen nightmare with Will in the center. He paints blood. He paints severed arms and dead Russians and dead sisters. The painting makes these images in his head less pressing.

He paints Pyotr, the vague memories he has of a small child by the sea, and gives it to Nina. He paints the child over and over and she accepts them all. They reach a detente. It wasn't Hannibal who rewrote him out of existence, after all.

After a few years...they're even happy. Mischa gets herself with child because Nina can't bear to do it again. They have a daughter, half Mischa and half Korean sperm donor, who they name Chi-eun after Nina's mother.

Hannibal sketches the baby every day. He still paints ice and blood. His present state is the product of his memories and his physical reality.

Chi-eun is a sturdy toddler when he sees Will. He is carrying her in a sling on his back, sketchbook in hand, and Will looks shocked but doesn't move from his stance by the coach

house.

Hannibal unlocks the back door. "Come in," he says to Will.

Will follows him as he sets his sketchbook on the mail table and continues up two flights of stairs to the nursery, where he puts the baby in her crib. She immediately stands and demands release, but Hannibal leaves her and closes the door, ignoring her cries. "She is sixteen months old."

"Your daughter?" Will says.

"Mischa's daughter." He looks at Will.

"What happened?" Will glances at Hannibal's left arm.

Hannibal never thinks of his hand any more, apart from the inconvenience it causes in handling a palette. "During my penultimate attempt to save my sister, I was struck in the arm with an axe. The bones of my forearm were shattered. The shards came through the skin while we ran through the woods, leading to infection and weakness. I rewound time to just after the death of the brigands but before we ran into the woods, therefore, and I removed my forearm, dressed the wound, and made sure we had several good meals before we began the trip. That time, at long last and after much effort, we survived."

"So you cut off your arm for your sister."

"I cut it off and fed it to her. I would do anything for my sister." Behind him, behind the door, Chi-eun is screaming for attention.

Will's face shows nothing. "I already knew you were a cannibal. I had dreams about it. I know who you are."

"So who am I?"

"A monster. The troll under the bridge. The child-eater."

"If you say so. I only remember saving a child."

Will looks to the side, out the window. He winces as Chi-eun reaches a particularly heartfelt key. "I remember things that are true and things that never happened. Go pick up your niece."

Hannibal does. Her shrieks subside when he opens the door, and she smiles when he reaches into the crib and she throws her chubby arms around his neck.

"I'm going to put dinner together. My sisters will arrive soon. I don't know what they will think of your presence." He puts Chi-eun back in her sling, where she is content to lurk against his back and gaze at Will with large dark eyes. She is shy of strangers.

"I don't know what *I* think of my presence," Will says. "I just...had to find you. I started Internet searches for you years ago. You know about the Internet?"

"Yes. We have a computer."

"Well, you're finally on it, your name and address. I thought I would find you in Lithuania, not in Paris."

"This was my uncle's house. Now it's mine."

"Are these yours?" Will asks.

Hannibal glances at him. "Yes." Mischa likes some of his paintings and has hung them around the house. That one, a field of red, is a painting of his own blood. She knows and likes this.

"I don't know what memories of you are true. Were you watching me in New Orleans eight years ago?"

"Yes."

"And in DC six years ago?"

"No."

"Fuck." Will presses his hands to his forehead. "I had a breakdown, a complete psychotic break. I was dreaming, sleepwalking, hallucinating in the middle of the day. I was hoping more of it was real. Did you--did we ever sit in a dining room with herbs on the walls? It was blue, and there were skulls on the table."

"No."

"Did we have sex in Hong Kong? The walls were orange and you had a camera. It was morning. I remember your eyes catching orange reflections like flame."

"I think so, in another reality."

Will catches his breath and looks up. "And--once--I woke up and you were sitting on my bed, and I said you were a serial killer and you agreed."

"Not in any reality I remember. I haven't killed anyone since I was a child."

"But maybe in a reality you don't remember. Jesus, I can't stand this," Will says. "If I rewind to being a fetus, or a fertilized egg, will this stop happening? Can I rewind back to the Ice Age and unmake Western civilization? Where do these powers stop? Did I do this to you, or did you do this to me?"

"I don't know," Hannibal says. "I have used my powers too much to remember where they came from. But Mischa forbade me from using the powers again, because they caused her and Nina too much pain. I promised I would not. I don't know what she would do if you tried to erase yourself. She's slightly younger than you are; likely it would erase her too, and the point would become moot."

Will doesn't raise his head. "I don't know what I would do if I had to grow up again with all these memories."

"I know," Hannibal says roughly. "It took me many, many tries to rescue Mischa. I remember them all. I found out later that she does too. We try not to talk about the past in this house." He slices a baguette, bracing it easily with the end of his arm. Chi-eun reaches for the heel and he gives it to her to gnaw.

"I was forced into medical retirement after my breakdown. I didn't know what to do with myself, so I came here. I did think about killing you. But why?"

Hannibal glances at him, finds Will's face drawn and his eyes wet. "I vowed to kill you after you inadvertently reversed Mischa's salvation," Hannibal says.

"That's not why. I don't even know why. I have memories that get confused with dreams, with other people. I don't know what's real. I want to blame it on you but it's not true," Will says. A tear spills over his eyelid and down his cheek.

Hannibal gives him bread and brie. "When I saw you in Hong Kong, I was drawn to you immediately. I don't know why either. We were something to each other, once, either great lovers or great enemies. Perhaps both."

"Because Hong Kong was real," Will says, as if reminding himself.

"I remember waking up before you and taking your picture in the dawn light. You scolded me for it. I don't know how to determine what reality is, other than what is in this moment, but I remember that."

"I remember that too," Will says. "You said I was beautiful and should be used to people looking at me."

"You are beautiful. But I remember you don't like being looked at. I stopped taking pictures of you."

"You invited me to Alaska and it was so peaceful. I was so happy there. It was the most comfortable I've ever been, in that life, in this life, in any life. Your sisters stopped looking me in the eye too, did you know that? And Pyotr. Oh God, Pyotr, is he--"

"He was never born in this reality. After you rewound time, circumstances did not align to allow his conception."

"Fuck. Fuck," Will says, folding over himself. "I'm sorry. I didn't--"

Hannibal kneels beside the chair and bends his head, taking Will's arm in his single hand. "That is how I felt when I realized Mischa remembered. How I still feel. Our unintended consequences are endless."

"Endless and unanswerable. How do you make amends for altering the course of random chance?"

"You don't."

"So this child...she was born instead of Pyotr?"

"No. This is Mischa's child. Pyotr was Nina's."

"I erased her child," Will says. "I erased a child."

"Yes," Hannibal whispers.

"He liked trucks. He always wanted me to explain how engines worked. I got really good at explaining internal combustion."

"Yes."

"He had dark eyes and brown hair. He tried to say I was his father."

"Yes."

"I erased him. He doesn't exist."

Hannibal can't answer. They are both silent for long minutes. Chi-eun finishes her bread and demands the slice given to Will. Will gives it to her, and she eats messily, dropping brie in Hannibal's hair. Will laughs, half a sob.

"The baby does keep things grounded in the present," Hannibal says.

"If Nina kills me, I deserve it," Will says.

"Yes. And neither of us deserve mercy, but we will take it when offered."

"Are you sure?" Will asks.

"It is what we owe to her," Hannibal says. "Mercy is bestowed by the powerful and accepted by the weak. We owe her our powerlessness."

Will sits, his eyes wide and wet. He opens his mouth, but says nothing.

Hannibal resumes making a simple dinner. Soup reheated on the stove, more bread and cheese, figs and white wine. "I can't have alcohol with my meds," Will murmurs. "Or grapefruit."

"Grapefruit is easily avoided, at least. Does the medication help?"

"No. I don't know what helps when you come unstuck from reality."

Hannibal pours him sparkling water instead. He places Chi-eun in her high chair and feeds her soup by careful spoonfuls. Chi-eun keeps craning her neck away to stare at Will as he eats. Hannibal adjusts his chair so that he doesn't block her view.

"I have a lot of memories of a kitchen, but not this one. Not a basement kitchen. It was...shiny."

The kitchen is original to the house, which was built in the *rocaille* style in the 1730s. The kitchen was upgraded to electric by Hannibal's grandfather, as a young man, and then the fittings were modernized along with the rest of the house when Hannibal's uncle inherited it. It's a large space, but a utilitarian space. Hannibal isn't comfortable in the formal parts of the house any more. Most nights he sleeps in the nurse's room next to the nursery.

"I have no memory of you in the house," Hannibal says.

"But another house? A big one?"

"I have no memory of you in the castle, either. I remember Alaska."

"That house was small and not very clean. Not shiny."

"Most of my memory is taken up by my childhood," Hannibal says.

"Yeah. And for me that never changed, apart from one thing. Did I ever tell you why I rewound?"

"No."

"I tried to keep my mom from leaving. I was just over two years old. I remember her setting me down and walking away; I've always had unusually clear early memories. So I tried to be...cuter. Then I tried crying. But nothing worked."

"She didn't leave because of you."

"I know. And it was stupid. Of course that would have changed the course of my life. I was so young--" He bites off his words and looks up.

The front door closes. Hannibal hears Nina and Mischa walking back and forth, then hears them on the stairs to the cellar kitchen. "Is that the ratatouille again? I don't like it, there isn't enough garlic," Mischa says as she descends.

"We have a visitor," Hannibal says. "I can add more garlic."

Mischa stops in the doorway to the kitchen. "If you add more garlic now, it will taste like raw garlic." Nina slips her arms around Mischa from behind and they both stare at Will.

"Perhaps more salt?"

"You can't fix what's fucked up," Nina says, not to Hannibal.

"I have conflicting memories of former lives, but I remember Pyotr. Hannibal told me what I did," Will says. "I'm sorry. I would fix it if I could, but--"

"But going back only makes it worse. I made Hannibal stop. I'll make you stop too," Mischa says.

"No. No, I'm never. No. I'm already shaky enough about what's real. I never want to--" Will shakes his head, keeps shaking. "No. I haven't. I kept getting--I went back and forth in time but I wasn't doing it. I ended up in the hospital because I wasn't making sense. I came unstuck. I was moving but nothing was responding, and then everything was different and didn't make sense. So I spent some time in the hospital."

"When was this?" Mischa asks. "What year when you came unstuck?"

"Uh. What year is it?"

"2010," Mischa says.

"Okay. It was 2004."

"That was me," Mischa says. "I stopped time. I guess it didn't stop for you."

"I think--it did stop and I kept going? Something like that."

"I would say I'm sorry, but we did it because of Pyotr. So I'm not sorry."

"No," Will says. "Anyway, they just let me out recently. I'm not better but I can basically function. Can I stay? Being around people who know this is real--I have no right to ask, but please. Can I stay?"

Hannibal and Mischa look to Nina. Nina hugs Mischa and looks at Will. "We're all just stupid children, aren't we?" Nina says. "I did things too, after I met Mischa and remembered. None of us are smart enough to use this power. None of us are gods. So stay with the rest of us. I remember from before that you were a friend."

Will wipes his eyes. "Thank you," he says.

Time

Will moves into the spare bedroom and locks the door behind him. Hannibal doesn't see him for five days.

On the sixth day, Will wanders around the house, looking lost. He stares at a painting of ice and blood. "Are you hungry?" Hannibal asks and Will jumps.

Will takes a breath. "I've been sneaking out at night and raiding the fridge. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. Are you hungry now?"

"Yes."

Hannibal tears dark greens, shakes up a vinaigrette, spreads paté on fresh bread. He serves lunch for two. Chi-eun is out with her mothers for the day.

Will takes a bite of paté and inhales, leaning back in his chair. "I've been eating hospital food and gas station food and airport food for six years. This is almost too much. And--fuck," Will says, wincing. "I'm detoxing from the medication. It gives me…side effects." He gestures to his head.

"Is that safe?"

"I looked it up. I'm staging it, it just...sucks. I'm sorry."

"It gives you a headache?"

"It makes me feel like my brain is being zapped by static electricity. Or vertigo. And I still, I remember eating with you, but not real memories. Memories of other lives. It makes me wonder how I picked this reality to return."

"You think you picked your reality?"

"No. Yes. No," Will decides. "No." He tries the salad.

"I don't know how my sister learned to time travel. I wonder this sometimes. But I don't remember how I learned, so maybe she learned spontaneously as I did, or maybe there is another person out there teaching us. I know I taught you."

"Yes," Will says. "You taught me and I misused it."

"Don't dwell on that."

"No. Um, could I get some paper? Big sheets if possible? Maybe butcher paper? I want to try to map out the various realities," Will says. "Every time I tried to do this in the hospital, they added another six months to my stay."

"Certainly," Hannibal says.

After lunch he shows Will to the formal dining room, which has been in white covers since his uncle died. He flicks the wallpaper where it is starting to peel away from the walls. "Feel free to mark this up. It dates from 1979. We will replace it regardless if we ever sell the house."

"But if you ever have a dinner party?"

"Will."

Will smiles and his mouth flickers at the edges. "Okay. No."

"No. But there is more than enough paper, if you do not wish to write on the walls."

Hannibal gets him started with those checkpoints he remembers: Hong Kong and Alaska; New Orleans, in the other lifetime. He tells Will, for the first time, about rewinding time to stop Mischa from killing Frederick.

"Chilton! I have two memories of him. He was my grad school advisor and he was also...someone in authority, someone I didn't like, in a more distant life." Will marks Frederick Chilton with two colors.

Will writes down bits and pieces from other lives. *Hannibal feeds me an ortolan. Hannibal sits on my bed and tells me he is a serial killer.* Both of those seem equally unlikely to Hannibal. "Eating ortolan is illegal," Hannibal says. "Where would I even find one?"

Will shrugs. "I have no context for any of this." He writes: *Mischa cuddling Pyotr and kissing his cheek.* He writes: *unloading my gun into a dead body hanging like a target.*

Will pauses over another paper. "Do you remember smelling me?" he asks.

"I like the way you smell, so yes," Hannibal says. "But not a particular incident."

Will turns. "You like how I smell?"

"I have a very strong sense of smell. I have opinions about everyone. You smell very nice apart from the lingering bitterness of the medication."

"Huh. In this case, you came up from behind and smelled me, and I objected, but that's all I can remember. I guess we weren't lovers."

"It is intimate," Hannibal says. He steps closer to Will and inhales.

Will closes his eyes. He turns his face toward Hannibal.

Hannibal kisses him.

*

Will lies under Hannibal's left arm, idly running his fingers over the end of his stump. Hannibal is finger-combing knots from his hair and thinking.

"Oh! Jesus, I'm sorry," Will says suddenly, jerking his fingers away.

"I don't mind. It's just part of my body," Hannibal says.

"Fuck." Will rolls over and embraces Hannibal's stomach. His cheeks burn against Hannibal's skin. "I was thinking about--this isn't pillow talk."

"I was realizing that until twenty minutes ago, I was a virgin in this reality. Is that pillow talk?"

Will raises his head. "Really?"

"I have memories of sexual contact, but not from this life." He smooths his thumb over Will's eyebrows, each in turn. "In this life, I was obsessed with your torture and murder before my sister stopped me. Once she forbade me to kill you, the desire melted away. But we are so closely connected this feels inevitable. Fight or fuck."

"I feel like I should be scared. Alarmed. Something. I'm not." Will pushes up to his elbows. "If you kill me, at least it's over. I remember what death was like."

"Do you?"

"It was quiet," Will says. "I felt like I was waiting for something, but there was no urgency and no disappointment. And no body. I'm tired of having a body, being hungry, having headaches, wanting things. Being dead was nice."

"When did you die?" Hannibal asks.

Will is quiet as he considers. "I don't know. I just remember it."

"It sounds like my death."

"When did *you* die?"

"Mischa killed me. Then she brought me back. I remember dying very clearly. It was indeed peaceful."

"Hm." Will rubs his cheek over Hannibal's chest hair.

Hannibal pushes the stump of his arm back into Will's hand. "Keep going." Will's hand is pleasant on his sensitive scar.

Will obligingly strokes his thumb along the old wound. "Pull my hair, okay? I'm having brain zaps."

Hannibal slides his fingers along Will's scalp, closes his hand and pulls firmly until Will sighs.

*

Will moves his papers down to the old servant's dining room. There are two levels of storage and service areas beneath the mansion, comprising the same amount of space but a great deal more actual room. There's the wine cellar deep underground, still serving its original purpose, and the kitchen of course, and the servant's dining room still has the long table intact. There are several rooms lined with shelves, some with fireplaces and some without. Two rooms have better quality hearths, adjoining parlors and locking doors, so those must have been the suites for the butler and housekeeper. Another room must have been for boots and ironing, judging from the stains in the sink.

But there are many more spaces that are far less clear. The second cellar, for example, which is currently filled with old furniture and drapery, but which slopes gently to an ancient drain covered with a pierced stone grate that emits a faint scent of smoke. The cellars are built from stone, unlike the brickwork of the rest of the house. Clearly they are remnants from an earlier structure. Hannibal has spent many hours peering down the old drain with a torch. He's never seen anything, but he can't stop looking.

So there is plenty of room for Will. There is room for an army in this house. It had held an army during the Terror, in fact; underneath the wallpaper in the formal dining room, there is still graffiti from the occupying revolutionaries scratched deep into the wood paneling. The original owners had been killed. A wine merchant bought the house afterwards and kept it in the family until the 1970s, when his business collapsed. The bank owned it for a time until Uncle Robertus bought it in 1979.

A young house. Not much history. But an old cellar, smelling of smoke, that Hannibal couldn't stay away from.

He lifts his head and finds Will in the doorway, watching him peer down the drain. "Do you want to see?" Hannibal asks.

Will shakes his head. He withdraws without taking his eyes off Hannibal.

*

Will has identified five timelines. One is labeled "the present." One is labeled "New Orleans." One is labeled "Hong Kong." One is labeled "the cabin." One is labeled "the dining room."

Hannibal reads through the last two. Will has a memory of being in the FBI in both timelines, and of knowing Hannibal. In one timeline, he remembers Hannibal in a blue dining room with skulls on the table. In the other, he remembers Hannibal in a cabin in the woods with skeletons in the cellar. He doesn't remember much detail from either timeline. He has a number of memories loose, uncoupled to any particular timeline. The memory of Hannibal scenting him is there in that last category.

Hannibal presses his nose to Will's hair. "It wasn't in this timeline. It wasn't in New Orleans, because I would remember. It wasn't in Hong Kong, because you objected to the intimacy."

"Right," Will says. "So. Cabin or dining room."

Hannibal considers. "You said the cabin had rotting skeletons beneath it?"

"I don't recall them rotting, but I do remember...skin." Will presses back into Hannibal's body.

"The cellar here smells like smoke. Wood smoke. The foundation of the building is much older than the rest of the house, but I have never been able to work out if they are medieval, or Roman. I am down there so often trying to distinguish Roman cement from medieval by scent." He kisses Will's head. "If I was spending time with rotting flesh, my sense of smell was not so keen. I would be rude in different ways."

"Hm," Will says, deep in his throat. "Sitting on my bed, telling me you're a serial killer, that's the cabin. Smelling me, feeding me dinner, that's the dining room. Subtle versus crude." He sorts several memories. *Scalpel pencil sharpener* goes under the dining room alongside *fed me ortolan*. *Feathers flying through the air* goes under the cabin alongside *vomiting off the porch*.

"Were we ever lovers before Hong Kong?"

"I don't think so," Will says. "At least not..." He reaches back and squeezes Hannibal's buttock, making him huff out a laugh. "Explicitly. Smelling me is, in fact, pretty intimate."

Hannibal trails his nose through Will's hair to his neck. "Yes," he whispers, mouthing Will's ear.

"Not in front of the timelines, I feel weird in here."

"There's a mattress in the cellar."

"The cellar gives me the creeps. There's a bed in my room."

"I don't like it upstairs." They had, in fact, had sex in Will's room many times, but Hannibal prefers to avoid that side of the house.

"Fucking in the kitchen is unsanitary," Will says. "We're going to have to do it on the floor." He squeezes Hannibal's buttock again.

"Come," Hannibal says, and leads Will to the wine cellar.

"Okay, this isn't creepy," Will agrees after a moment. The wooden racks are still half full, even though Hannibal can't be bothered to purchase rare vintages, only young wines for cooking. He keeps it clean and dust-free. He likes the atmosphere, both homey and cave-like.

"I try," Hannibal says. He leads Will to the armchair.

Will shoots him a look. "You say you don't like the fancy parts of the house, but here we are with quilted leather armchairs and stained glass lamps like a gentleman's club."

"It's different underground." He seats Will in the chair and kneels before him, opening his trousers. "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself. I am vast. I contain multitudes." He presses his nose and mouth to Will's inner thigh.

"Walt Whitman? Really?"

"I get tired of French poetry. Do you want me to continue, or do you want to tease me?"

"I can see the serial killer in you," Will says.

Hannibal stops. He sits back on his heels, looking at Will.

"There's an anger that burnt into ash. There is a bonfire in your paintings, but you, yourself, you're soft and hollow." Will leans forward and draws Hannibal's forearm and stump into his hands. "But I can see, in another life, how you would have banked that fire and let it simmer and made art out of people rather than paint."

"Art? Do you think so?"

"I know it. I don't know how I know, but I know."

Hannibal slides his hand around Will's forearm. Will is drawing his thumb over the scar at the end of Hannibal's left arm. "In this life, my violent impulses are walled in by my sister's will. Did I have Mischa in those other lives?"

"I don't know," Will says. "Probably not."

Hannibal kisses Will's hand. "I am not the same man I was ten years ago. Certainly I am not the same man I was sixty years ago."

Will pulls him up to kiss him on the mouth. Hannibal settles over him, straddling Will's thighs with his knees planted on the seat. He braces himself with his hand on the back of the chair and caresses Will's cheek with his stump.

Will unbuttons Hannibal's shirt to stroke his belly. "And I've been connected to you for five lifetimes, and hunting you for at least two of those. So here we are. I caught you," Will says, pinching Hannibal's sides.

"Here I am," Hannibal says.

Blood

They get by. Will is nervous outside, so he stays in and starts writing ghost stories under a pseudonym. Mischa feels confined inside, so she takes up birdwatching. Hannibal doesn't like the "family" part of the house, so he stays in the kitchen and cellars, and keeps painting. Nina, after puttering around for a while, tries out as an extra for a television show and is hired back many more times due to her "interesting" face. She's vaguely offended, but continues regardless. Chi-eun starts school.

Chi-eun doesn't like school. Her second day, she sneaks out midmorning. The school director calls the house and everyone, even Will, goes to the school to look for her.

Mischa, unfortunately, is the one who finds Chi-eun sitting concealed in a tree. She yells. Chi-eun cries. Nina, Hannibal, and Will run to them, to calm them both down, but then the universe shakes and time has been rewound back to breakfast.

Hannibal flattens his hand on the table. He looks at Will, at Nina, at Mischa. Mischa presses her hands to her mouth. "Oh my god."

"Mama?" Chi-eun says.

Mischa stands and staggers away from the table. "Oh god." She falls when she reaches the stairs.

Hannibal calls in to the school, excusing Chi-eun for the day. Nina sits with Mischa, rocking her back and forth. Chi-eun sits in Will's lap, sucking her thumb.

Hannibal strokes Will's hair and bends to kiss Chi-eun's head. "It's all right, darling. Mama is upset right now, but not with you. You did nothing wrong."

"I don't like school. The maîtresse isn't nice," Chi-eun says.

Hannibal looks at Mischa. "Sometimes we have to do things we do not like," Hannibal says.

*

Hannibal takes Chi-eun to school the following day. He sits outside and watches until it is time for her to leave. There are no incidents.

Chi-eun is smiling as she departs. "Is all well?" he asks her.

"Yes! The maîtresse was nice today," she says.

"Good!"

He is relieved. Mischa wouldn't leave the house. He left her and Will warily circling each other in the kitchen. When he returns, Mischa is reading Will's manuscripts and Will is hiding in the wine cellar.

Chi-eun climbs into Mischa's lap and kisses her on both cheeks. Mischa kisses her back, over and over. "Tell your boyfriend these are good," Mischa says to Hannibal.

Hannibal descends to the wine cellar. "Mischa says she likes your stories," he tells Will.

"Oh, God. I can't believe I let her read those."

Hannibal tries to kiss him but Will shies away. "You know you're a good writer."

"Yeah, but I don't know if I'm a good…storyteller. My mind is chaotic. I was trying to pull threads out of a tangle. Is the baby okay?"

"She's okay."

"Good. Good. I'm not okay. Not fair for me to not be okay if the kid isn't okay, though," Will says, shaking out his hands. The shudder goes up his shoulders to his head. He can't stay still.

"Nothing to worry about," Hannibal says. He puts his hand on Will's shoulder and Will backs into his arms; Hannibal wraps his arms around Will's chest and squeezes as hard as he can.

Will exhales and relaxes into him. Hannibal squeezes again, not quite as hard, and then Will taps his arm and Hannibal lets him turn around and loop his arms over Hannibal's neck. Hannibal holds him, firmly, squeezing at intervals.

When Will has fully relaxed, he presses his lips to Hannibal's neck. "Mischa is edgy," he murmurs. "It's catching."

"I know. I don't know what to do."

"Um. Reassure her? Validate her feelings? I'm not good at this either."

"I'll talk to Nina," Hannibal says. He kisses Will on the cheek and goes upstairs to find Nina.

Mischa and Chi-eun are still in the kitchen, so Hannibal continues up to the informal parlor, which Nina favors; indeed, she is there. Hannibal knocks on the open door as he steps into the room. "Chi-eun had a better day at school," he says.

Nina gives him a weak smile. Hannibal crosses the room to sit on the sofa beside her.

This room was last decorated in 1982, but it was done fairly neutrally, so it has aged well. Only the oversized floral swags of curtain give it away. The hand-painted gold and white wallpaper and the gold and white marble fireplace were carefully preserved through the renovation. The chairs and sofa are warm tan leather, set around a predominantly mint Persian rug. Tall vases used to be filled with exotic plants, Hannibal recalls. His uncle died in this room.

"Mischa is so afraid for Chi-eun," Nina says.

"What do you think we should do?"

"I don't know. She's afraid of what else she might do to protect her. What do I tell her? I have to say we need to let our baby suffer." Nina closes her eyes. "What if something happens to Chi-eun? Some man? A truck? How could I stop from changing that? Mischa explained to me the side effects, that we destroy the world and remake it entirely. But what do I owe to the world? What right has it to ask this of me? This is what I'm shouting at myself," Nina says. She draws her knees up and circles her legs with her arms.

"My actions had terrible consequences for you that I did not realize. This is the reason my sister forbade further action."

"In the movies, they say not to step on a bug if you time travel because you could change the future. But just by being there, breathing and acting and knowing, we make it different. And now, in the present, the possibility of reversing time is changing how we act. We are contaminated with knowledge," Nina says. "So I cannot time travel, but I also cannot forget that I can time travel. I must refrain from action that prevents my daughter from harm. These are impossible things. Why have we done this to ourselves?"

"I don't know," Hannibal says. "I don't remember. I only know how much I wanted to be able to do it."

"I used it to win the lottery," Nina says. Hannibal looks at her, confused. "To get out of Russia and meet Mischa. I got the winning lottery numbers, rewound to the previous day and bought a winning ticket. One hundred thousand euros."

Hannibal laughs. After a moment, Nina joins him.

*

Hannibal looks at the timelines. In their current form, there are note cards pinned to the table with a number of colors and symbols appended to add meaning. Will has added the notation "dogs" to the dinner table, cabin, and New Orleans timelines. "What is 'dogs' code for?" he asks.

"Nothing--that is, it just means what it says. I had a bunch of dogs in those timelines," Will says. "In this life, I used to pick up stray dogs and take them to the shelter. I was always good at getting sick dogs to come to me. But I never kept any. I never felt stable enough to give them a good home."

"Do you want a dog now?"

Will shakes his head. "I can't even leave the house. It's not fair."

"The garden is fenced. A small dog, short legs, he can take many steps in a small space," Hannibal says.

"Why do these timelines end?" Will asks.

"What?"

"At some point, everything but the present timeline ends. New Orleans...that was because you met me, and you remembered the Hong Kong timeline, right?"

"Yes."

"So the timeline ends because you doubled back. All of these have micro-branches, really, little changes inside them. In Hong Kong, you said you doubled back to stop Mischa killing Chilton." Will traces out a loop in the air. "Then that ended because I thought I could change one thing, and I changed everything...so that was me. Before that, do you think cabin came before or after dinner table?"

Hannibal shakes his head. He doesn't know.

"Dogs, no dogs," Will murmurs. "Kids, no kids. The end point. I feel like if I could figure out the pattern, I would be able to...something. Control something. If there was just a handle to grab on to."

"The only handle on time is time. Come, let's sleep together."

"My room." Will says.

"If we must."

Hannibal moved a bed into the butler's suite and sleeps there most nights. He is most comfortable underground. Will prefers the air and high ceilings of the upstairs rooms, though, so when they sleep together, it is upstairs.

Will closes the door and touches Hannibal's hip. "Do you want to--?"

"No. Unless you do?"

"No. Just lie with me," Will says.

They ready themselves for sleep and slide under heavy covers naked. "My brain itches," Will says, wrinkling his nose. "I'm tired but it's not registering."

"Rest on your stomach," Hannibal says. Will obeys. Hannibal climbs onto his back and embraces him. "Breathe against my weight."

Will does. "Mmm," he sighs. "Better."

Hannibal lies awake after Will drifts into sleep. His eyes, adjusting to the dark, pick out the gilded edges of the designs in the plaster ceiling. Cherubs gambol overhead, caught mid-flight, fat thighs and fluffy wings imprisoned for two hundred years. Wide golden eyes stare at the changing occupants of a gold-painted bed that has never changed.

The upstairs is so terribly loud, so frantic, so pushing, so demanding. Hannibal remembers being a child here, but it feels vague. He mostly remembers chess.

Chess, and saving Mischa. He rubs the stump of his arm. He closes his eyes.

He wakes because Will is muttering and twitching. He blinks, orienting himself; Will is on his side, facing away, his muscles tense and his jaw clenched. He is moving his hands in short jabs.

"Will?" Are you supposed to wake a sleepwalker? It doesn't look like a pleasant dream. He takes Will's shoulder and shakes him lightly. "My dear."

Will rolls onto his back. His eyes open halfway, then fly open, and he punches Hannibal in the face.

Hannibal falls backwards out of bed. "Will!" But Will is following him, swarming out of the covers and landing on Hannibal. He mutters wordlessly, incomprehensibly, and his hands find Hannibal's neck and he starts to choke him.

Hannibal clutches Will's hand with his own and pushes feebly at Will's face with his stump. Will is compressing his throat with the heels of his hands and Hannibal sees glowing spots already, sees voids of black in the darkness. The emptiness is swallowing him. Death is returning to claim him.

Will gasps. He jerks back, releasing Hannibal's throat. Hannibal curls on his side and gasps in huge panting breaths; his ears ring, his eyes throb, he has a headache, he is half strangled. He coughs. He heaves for breath.

"Jesus Christ," Will says in a small voice. "I was dreaming."

He knows this. His throat throbs. His ears ring. He coughs again.

"I'm calling an ambulance."

Hannibal would object, but he can't find the breath.

*

Hannibal is hospitalized until the swelling in his throat subsides. "I convinced the police not to arrest Will," Mischa tells him.

"Thank you," Hannibal croaks. He wraps a scarf around his neck to hide the marks and leaves the hospital with his sister.

They walk. It's not far, and they both have strong legs. "I could ask the police to come back. What happened?" Mischa asks.

"He was asleep. Dreaming. That's all."

"That's all? So if he sleep-murders you?"

"It's one solution to our family dilemma."

Mischa stops and snarls at him, silently. She looks so much like him: more and more like him as they age. Her face is lined and her hair graying, just like his. The bones are pushing

through her skin, sharpening her face in the same way as his own. "Nobody murders my brother," Mischa says.

"All right," Hannibal says. "I will sleep in my own bed and I will not be murdered."

Mischa frowns. "But you want him in the house?"

"He is family of a kind."

"And you love him?"

Hannibal shrugs. He has never known how to identify the feeling of love. He thinks he loves his sisters and his niece. He has different feelings about Will. Love, though? Romantic love? He and Will have nothing he has seen in movies, with tears and marriage. "I am drawn to him. I enjoy his presence. That hasn't changed."

Mischa sighs. "You *are* cold. We are strange creatures, brother."

"Most strange," Hannibal agrees. They continue home.

Chi-eun greets him at the back door with a clinging hug. "I missed you!" she sobs.

"I know, my darling, I missed you as well!" His voice falters to a rasp at the end. He clears his throat. "I was sick."

"Don't be sick!" Chi-eun says. She hugs his neck roughly and he winces.

Mischa pries her free. "Come here, monkey."

Hannibal continues down into the service hall. Will is sitting at the kitchen table with a teacup. Hannibal joins him. Will shoves the teacup in front of Hannibal and Hannibal accepts.

The tea is cold but it soothes his raw throat. "We will need to sleep separately," he says.

"Okay."

"What were you dreaming of?"

"You were gutting me," Will says.

"What timeline do you think that was?"

"Just a dream," Will says.

Hannibal raises his eyebrows and sips the cold tea.

Will sighs. "Dinner table, I think," he says.

"Hm. Do you think there was a timeline before that, or was that the first?"

"I feel like it was our first," Will says. "I think you killed me. I think that's how I died."

Will retreats to his room after that. Hannibal goes to the butler's parlor, holds an ice pack to his neck, and paints.

*

Hannibal is still awake in the early morning, painting Will with a gaping gut wound in white and gold. He paints seraphim around him, wings covering their feet and heads from the sight of man.

He hears feet on the stairs. Mischa. He puts down his paintbrush and steps into the hall.

She passes him, wordlessly, going into the room with the timelines. He follows.

"I was dreaming," she says. "I dreamed that you told me a story where I was dead."

"Did I?" Hannibal asks. He doesn't remember.

"I asked what dead meant and you said that's when someone hurts you and eats you. I remember that. Hurts you and eats you."

Hannibal can't argue. He never let it go so far before he rewound, in that last, violent struggle, but he can't argue.

"How did you lose your arm, Hannibal?" Mischa asks.

"When Mother and Father were killed, I was hit with an axe as well."

"Will showed me a story. I don't think he meant to send it. The little boy cuts off his arm and feeds it to the little girl. Why? Why is that in the story, Hannibal?"

"To give you strength," Hannibal murmurs.

Mischa plucks up the card that states *Hannibal sits on my bed and tells me he is a serial killer.* "Who the fuck are you, Hannibal?"

"When you bound me, you said it. I am a terrible thing."

"And what am I?"

"My sister," Hannibal says.

Her hands are shaking on the table. "Will started having dreams of past lives and now he's murdering you in his sleep. Am I next?"

Hannibal can't answer.

"I'm next," Mischa says. "Then Nina, then Chi-eun, probably. Never you. Because you're a terrible thing."

"Yes," Hannibal says, very softly.

Mischa goes back to bed.

*

Breakfast is quiet. Chi-eun whines about going to school: today she doesn't like it. "You have to go," Nina tells her. "You had fun yesterday."

"I did not!"

"You did, you said so."

"No!" Chi-eun bursts into tears. Mischa and Will both flinch and leave the table, heading in different directions.

"I will walk you to school and back home. You must go to school, it's how you learn to be a big girl," Hannibal says.

Chi-eun resumes her tears. "I don't want to be big! I want to be little!"

Hannibal looks at Nina helplessly. "You are six years old and you must go to school," Nina says firmly. "This is not a discussion."

"No!" Chi-eun wails. And she rewinds time.

Hannibal gasps. He's not sure when it is. They're again in the kitchen, and Mischa is here, and Will, and Nina, and Chi-eun doesn't look so much smaller--

"Now I'm five and I don't have to go!" Chi-eun yells. She throws herself on the floor and sobs.

"Oh God," Nina whispers.

"Chi-eun," Mischa says, her voice strangled. "You taught her," she says to Hannibal.

"No," Hannibal says.

Mischa looks at Will. "You?!"

"No," Will says. "No, no, no. No." His hands are shaking on the table top.

Mischa looks at Nina and Nina just shakes her head, her face drawn.

"*When are we*," Will says. His chest and jaw shake along with his hands.

Hannibal picks up Chi-eun, takes Will's hand, and pulls them both into the storage cellar. Will shivers, disliking the cellar and its faint smell of smoke.

Hannibal touches his forehead to his niece's. "What did you do?" he asks her.

"The same thing Mama did," Chi-eun replies. She sniffles and presses her face against his cheek.

"How did you know what to do?"

"I don't know. My head hurts," Chi-eun whimpers.

"Too many memories," Hannibal says. He kisses her hair. "It will pass."

"All things will pass," Will mutters. He presses his trembling hands to the wall until the knuckles whiten. "All flesh is grass. All walls will fall. All time is now."

"Try to calm yourself, Will. Quoting the Bible never helps."

"My mind is dissolving in time like smoke in wind," Will says. His eyes are drawn to the drain in the floor. "Burnt offerings."

"What god do we pray to?" Mischa asks from the door.

"Ourselves," Will whispers harshly.

"If there are fates, we control them. So I agree. We pray to ourselves," Hannibal says to Mischa.

"And there's nothing above us that can stop us, or they would have already done so."

"Are you ready to step into your power, sister?" Hannibal asks. He feels--free. He feels wild. He doesn't know what will happen. His sister has fenced him him for so long.

Mischa looks at Will. She looks at Chi-eun, and Hannibal sets the girl on her feet. She clings to his waist, hiding her face in his shirt.

"Without a past, there can't be a future," Mischa says. She crosses to him and takes his head in her hands.

"But the now can last forever."

"We're not gods," Mischa says.

She pushes him with her mind. They fall backwards in time, both of them together, growing younger, and Hannibal is helpless to control it. Mischa's determination propels them like an arrow from a bow.

He is thirty, and Mischa does not release her grasp on him.

He is twenty. Mischa starts to shrink.

He is fifteen, and he shrinks as well.

He is eight. Mischa is a toddler.

He is seven, and Mischa is a baby.

He is six, and Mischa does not exist. She will never exist. He feels this loss for the barest spark of time before he loses the thought in the whirlwind.

He is five.

He is a baby.

There is no longer awareness of self, and he remembers nothing.

Infinity

After nine months, a baby boy is born. His parents argue, his father pointing out that no Russian-speaker will be able to pronounce the name, his mother speaking passionately of tradition. In the end, his father relents, and the baby is named Hannibal.

*

the end.

End Notes

Trigger warnings: non-explicit underage and adult prostitution; extremely rude anatomical words; child death; the concept of erasing people from reality; mental illness; amputation and disability. If you need more thorough warnings, feel free to email or @ me on Twitter. Links in my profile https://archiveofourown.org/users/Basingstoke/profile

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